Separation Anxiety in Early Childhood

By Eleni McDermott

Mastering the challenge of separation anxiety is as crucial to the development of a child, as mastering the art of walking!

With the increase in non-parental care, it is most likely that children will have experienced several different early childhood environments (including grandparent and other private care) before starting school. If those transitional experiences are not positive or a child has difficulty adjusting to them, it can have detrimental effects on their development, especially in relation to their ability to cope with stressful situations and become more resilient.

Secure attachments are therefore, vital for healthy development. Children, who experience early care-giving that is not sensitive and responsive, develop anxious insecure attachments. Children whose separation anxiety is allowed to continue for prolonged periods in the hope the eventually they will “settle in” could also be prone to future separation anxiety disorders.

Even with healthy attachments and positive early experiences, the nature of care and education outside the home can still be quite stressful for children. They are often secure in their daily home life and routine. Change, involves them in having to:

- Develop other relationships (with adults and children).
- Accommodate different environments and routines.
- Adjust their senses (smell, touch, taste, sight).
- Negotiate sharing and turn-taking with a larger group.
- Manage their emotions which usually involve anxiety, fear, anger etc.
- Learn to say “goodbye”.
- Deal with second and third languages.
- Move homes.
- Sometimes travel to another country.

How well children manage and master these new changes is influenced by four variables.

1. Their developmental stage
2. The social and emotional environment they are entering
3. Family attitudes both before and during the separation process
4. Individual child’s personality and temperament.
Every child is a unique individual and will experience emotions in his/her own way. How they perceive or understand events in their lives will affect how they respond to them. There are however, still common behaviors based on a child's developmental stage that we can expect them to follow. Often we do not pay heed to these stages and this can be a stumbling block for how realistic our expectations of their behavior will be.

**Babies – 6 months**
Infants at this stage show the least signs of being upset by separation. Although they have learned to recognize a parent's voice, smell and manner of handling, they will accept the comfort and assistance of someone who can interpret their cues (different crying etc).

**6-12months**
At this stage young children prefer their parents to comfort them if they are available. An infant may have forgotten for a while that their parent was not around (that could last all day). When the parent returns however, they have remembered and all the sad feelings return.

**12 months – 2 years**
This is the hardest stage of separation. They begin to realize that the parent doesn't cease to exist when out of sight but they can't keep the mental image of the parent in their minds. This can be very stressful for children. That is why they keep asking for mum or dad continuously. They tend to follow parents around and may become angry, anxious or aggressive when the parent is out of sight. Unfamiliar people can be frightening at this stage.

**3- 5 years**
At this stage children tend to suffer less from separation anxiety. They are able to talk about their feelings (especially if they feel emotionally safe to do so) and have experienced positive separations before. Children at this stage however, may regress developmentally. Tantrums, thumb sucking, baby talk may occur. Some start the first week with no problems and the second week their behavior changes. This isn't a bad thing as it often reveals that the child is comfortable enough to show his/her true feelings. Sometimes children at this stage can feel deserted and therefore refuse to leave at the end of the day. Tricks may include not packing up, insisting on long drinks etc. This can leave parents having to drag a protesting child out the door.
When children are separated from their parents for short periods of time, they may actually develop less anxiety when the need for childcare occurs. If a child hasn’t experienced manageable periods of separation, then the type of environment and emotional climate that the care-giver creates can make all the difference.

Below are some strategies that parents could use to assist in the transition from home to school.

**Tips for Parents**

1. Children pick up on your stress and anxiety (even babies). How well you deal with the separation will determine how well your child does. If you need time to ease into the idea of care and education outside the home then be prepared for your child to feel that too.

2. Don’t share too much of your emotions with your child as you may make them feel guilty for having fun.

3. Make sure you tell the teacher that your child is used to being carried and comforted in a certain way. -Now is not the time to be making changes to those rituals.

4. Young children are aware of much more than we give them credit for. Remember, that they may not have the words to communicate but they have the ears to listen. What they don’t understand …they will use their imagination to fill in the gaps! This can cause anxiety if they are only hearing “bits” of conversations.

5. Secure attachments take time to develop. If children are placed in the care of someone else from time to time and the parent returns as promised (at the right time) then they are being sensitive and responsive which in turn, develops less anxiety. They are also helping to ease their child into other environments outside the home.

6. When you go back to pick your child up after school, use positive statements - instead of saying at the end of the day "I really missed you" say something like "I'm really glad to see you". It makes a big difference!

7. Plan your first week of school with flexibility in mind so you can return to pick up your child if she/he is distressed.

8. Be specific and let your child know when you will be returning. **ALWAYS SAY GOODBYES** regardless of your child’s age-AND always arrive on time. This will build trust.

9. Always be honest -don’t protect your child by lying to them.
10. If your child has a security object (blanket, toy etc) let them take it along during the transitional period.

**IMPORTANT FINAL POINT**
If your child demonstrates a persistent reluctance to detach from you, or is constantly fearful, has nightmares or complains of physical symptoms when separation occurs, seek advice from your Doctor.

**Tips for Early Childhood Professionals**
Below are some strategies that teacher’s could use to assist both child and parents/s adjust to the new changes.

1. Realize that the parent may feel he/she has little influence or power over what could happen to the child now that he/she is in your care.
2. Suggest more positive statements, e.g. reframing “I missed you” for something like “I’m really glad to see you”
3. Share some things about yourself that may encourage a parent to disclose her fears, concerns and anxieties.
4. Take photographs of children at play both with and without parents, so that parents can see that you value and encourage partnerships.
5. When a child cries upon sight of a parent instead of saying “Oh Lily has been good all day until now” it would be more supportive to the parent to say “Lily is crying now because she remembers how much she has missed you”.

**For Children**
1. Understand and learn young children’s cues and try to deal with them in the same manner the parent does. For example, knowing when a child is crying because of thirst or hunger or tiered not necessarily because they are missing mum and dad.
2. Keep reassuring the child who asks constantly for parent/s.
3. Be weary of getting to close physically if you sense the child is frightened instead use objects (secondary attachments) such as toys, clothing, books etc as handles to focus interactions.
4. Encourage security objects from home or anything that reminds the child of familiarity. This will make the child feel more secure.
5. Be patient and plan to be flexible in your programming and routines. Now is not the time to be making major changes or to be enforcing too many rules,
6. Be inclusive in the language you use during the day e.g. **OUR** sandpit **OUR** toys, so that the child develops a sense of belonging in the new environment.
7. Remember that clinginess and tears are normal reactions to separation anxiety - your aim is to help the child master this new developmental challenge and that takes time.
IMPORTANT FINAL POINT

Never ration physical contact under the notion that the more you pick up the child, the more attention they will demand (the attachment system works to keep children close until they feel safe and secure to venture into the environment). The more content the child, the sooner they will develop their independence.

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