

SEPARATIONS

Separations from people we enjoy being with are a common part of daily life. As adults we accept them as such and probably don't even think about the inevitable sadness, disappointment, reluctance, insecurity, sense of loss that is likely to accompany them. Yet those feelings are probably there at least in some degree with all separations from people we are close to.

Young children have less life experience, self control and understanding of time than adults do to draw on when it comes to coping with separation. Besides, young children are more dependent than most adults on the presence of someone they know, trust and feel secure with to help them cope with new situations. No wonder children have difficulty separating – it's really amazing that so many of them cope so well.

Although in general children get better at separating as they get older, there are many factors that contribute to their reactions to separation being somewhat unpredictable. In addition to obvious factors such as the child not feeling well or the environment or person the child is being left with being unfamiliar, with very young children, especially those between the ages of one and three years, their understanding of the world and what is going on changes so rapidly. A familiar separation that has been completed comfortably for some time may one day become a distressing situation. Sometimes this can only be attributed to the child's understanding the situation differently because of their rapidly developing cognitive skills. In other words, they see the same situation differently and react differently.

Some important points to keep in mind in helping your child cope with separation include the following:

- The presence of a familiar person helps a child adjust to a new situation and people, and contributes to the child being able to form a constructive relationship with the new person. Stay with your child in a new situation until the child becomes familiar with the people and the setting.
- It isn't typically the case that if you prepare for the separation carefully and appropriately and choose the perfect moment it will be painless for everyone. This may happen occasionally but even when it has been handled sensitively there is still likely to be some distress.
- Remember that it is easier to separate when there is an inviting, comfortable and interesting environment to go to. Try to choose an environment for your child that is set up attractively as children enter so that the child has something to do rather than just focus on the sadness. Most importantly, ensure that the person or people you are leaving your child with understand and are sensitive to your child.
- Just because a child gets over being distressed soon after you leave does not mean that the distress wasn't genuine. The act of parting from someone you love is sad, whether you are an adult or a child.
- Try to give the child an active role in the separation. Opening the door or waving goodbye, with a trusted adult close by, feels better than just sitting or standing by helplessly as you leave.
- Make sure that there is someone helping the child to cope with the separation if the child is distressed. That person needs to acknowledge the child's feelings, comfort him or her, and then help them get involved.
- Remember that it is perfectly normal for parents to have difficulty separating from their child, even when the child is comfortable with the separation. Be with your child until you are both relatively comfortable about separating. It is natural that some parents will need help separating, knowing when and how to do it in the most constructive and caring way for both the child and the parent. As a parent you should expect sensitive help.

Separation experiences are one of the times when children most need our empathy and support.