

Separate but Happy

As we look back on the long, lazy days of summer and remember the fun we had watching our children explore the sea life in the surf at the beach or attempt the high dive at the pool for the first time; it might be with a bit of sadness that we think about the upcoming separation and the start of a new school year. After all, it will be a teacher, not us, who will see our child's face light up with pride when they remember that C-A-T spells "Cat" or be congratulated by classmates after making the winning goal while playing soccer at recess. For the first-time parent of a Kindergartener, this can be an extremely nerve-racking time. That is why I have chosen to explore the topic of anxiety about separation for my first posting this year.

The Two Sides of Separation Anxiety

There has been a lot of talk in the child-rearing press about Separation Anxiety in children. We know that this term refers to the fear a child experiences when they are separated from the love, warmth and protection of his/her parents. He or she starts to wonder who will take care of them in their parents' absence and how will their needs be met. The separation anxiety doesn't abate until one of them returns to address the child's needs again.

Anxiety over separation is entirely different and is experienced by the parents who have a lot of trouble leaving their child with anyone else. They may have real, conscious concerns about how their child will manage without them; in addition, they may have unconscious anxieties that are intertwined with their own past and present experiences with being left. So for the parent who has anxiety over separation, you tend to become trapped in a cycle of frustrating behavior, such as yelling, placating or emotionally removing yourself from your child when they need you the most. Until you can change your behavior around the periods of parting, you're loading your child with your own anxieties as well as his or hers. A great deal of your child's reaction depends on your lack of conflict in new situation.

The Positive Side of Separation

Anxiety gives you the cue to act. Reactions that come from fear can hurt everyone involved. Reactions that are created from clearheaded thinking combined with self-awareness can enable you to use separation as an opportunity to build confidence and strength in both your child and yourself.

Children with ambivalent parents who can't seem to take charge of a situation appropriately often end up pushing every emotional button in order to get their parent to react. The child is simply unprepared to be the decision-maker in these emotionally-loaded moments and it confuses them terribly when their parents abdicate power and put them in charge. If you have difficulty separating from your child, here are 7 steps to follow to improve your skills at successfully separating:

Step I. Identify what's really bothering you

Some of the major concerns most parents face with separation include:

- A feeling that you are physically being torn apart
- Upset that your child can do without you
- Anger at your child for not allowing you to live your own life
- Embarrassment about what others think of your attachment to your child

Share these concerns or any others you may be having with your spouse or friend and try to get an honest assessment of the severity and impact these issues are having on your ability to separate successfully.

Step II. Connect with your past

Thinking back to a time in your past when you were forced to separate from the two people you saw as all-powerful, all-protecting, may be frightening and uncomfortable. However, it is imperative to find the cues in your unconscious that trigger your panicked reaction when you separate from your child. If feelings of having been abandoned are very painful, you may find that you relive the same emotion when you go through a parting with your child now, from your perspective as a parent. It is critical to remember, that you do not have to repeat the same ineffective or detrimental patterns your parents may have developed around the procedures for separating from you as a child.

Step III. Get the Facts

To get a better handle on what is going on in your absence; get factual information about how the child is after you have separated. Any new situation holds its share of secrets and hidden surprises and the unknown is a breeding ground for anxiety. The first line of inquiries should be with the child's classroom teacher. After that, a call to the school psychologist could be very helpful to get information about how your child

is functioning outside the classroom, such as during lunch and recess. Your examination of the real situation will help you put your anxieties in perspective.

Step IV. Understand your child's point of view

It is incredibly helpful to elicit your child's perspective on parting. They often have unbelievable insights that will enlighten even the most anxious parent. As the two of you have a dialogue together, you're laying the groundwork for the two interrelated halves of your parting: the way you say good-bye to your child and the way your child says good-bye to you. Talk to your child with words and body language to find out what his/her needs are when you separate.

Acting on your child's feelings

1. When you're about to leave, make everything concrete for your child. Tell them how long you'll be gone, where you're going and what he or she will be doing while you are apart.
2. Never try to trick your child. This destroys the trust between you and your child and makes separating more difficult.
3. Try not to read your child's mind or give him or her the opening for more fears than s/he may already have.
4. Remember that everyone has moods and although one day the separation may have been easy and smooth, that doesn't mean that tomorrow will be the same.
5. Do enlist the help of the caregivers or teachers in your parting. If your child does better being left alone to assess the classroom situation for him or herself, let the teacher know that. If they prefer a close physical connection with their caregiver, the teacher should know that too so they can be closer to that child during the morning routine.

Step V. Ground Yourself

Always try to imagine and verbalize your worst fear; *"My child is small and could be hurt by the other kids"* or *"Look at how sad she is that I am leaving for work. She'll hate me forever!"* Then find a counter argument to it to bring those worst fears into a realistic perspective. For example, for the first fear, your **grounding statement** could be, *"There are teachers here who are trained to see trouble before it begins. Once he gets over his fear of being away from me, he'll be happy with his peers and teachers.* For the

second fear listed above, your **grounding statement** could be, "*She'll be so excited to see me when we get home and we will have so much to share with each other and I know that she is fine very shortly after I leave.*"

Step VI. Step back and see the scene with different eyes

Use your imagination to envision how you would like to see the parting between you and your child. Paint a mental picture for yourself that shows your competence in the situation and you will be able to use this vision to improve your next separation. If you could imagine a scenario that might not be perfect, but at least you both get a little more relaxed about the prospect of spending time apart, you're on the right track.

Step VII. Establish new patterns

Make up a pattern for parting. Children love rituals; they find comfort in repeating the same activities over and over because that builds competence in their skills. My children and I used the suggestion from the book "The Kissing Hand" and each morning before they left for school we would kiss the palm of each others' hands and *carry* that kiss with us all day.

You have to trust that you've already given your young child the confidence and ability to carry on without you. Letting them know that you are sure that they will be successful in school is one way to build that confidence. Encourage your child to see every new situation as an opportunity for growth and learning. The sad truth about parenting is that our ultimate goal is to develop people that can live without us! To unlearn our anxious behavior, we need to find new consequences to old fears - to believe that this story can have a happy ending! When you have developed new patterns for separating, parting may still be sweet sorrow at times, but reuniting will feel even better!!

Adapted from The Anxious Parent by Michael Schwartzman, 1990, Skylight Press, N.Y, N.Y.