Action for Children

Helping Your Child Through Separation Anxiety

Presented by Action for Children's Child Care Information and Referral Team

Starting child care can be a big adjustment for both children and parents. It's normal for young children to feel anxious when separating from their caregivers, especially in a new environment. With patience, consistency, and teamwork, separation anxiety can ease over time.

Why Does Separation Anxiety Happen?

- Children don't yet understand that a parent will return, so separation feels permanent.
- Child care settings can be overwhelming with new people, routines, and noises.
- Separation anxiety is a normal part of early emotional development, especially between 6 months and 3 years.
- Previous experiences: Changes like starting child care, moving homes, or past stressful separations can increase anxiety.
- Temperament: Some children are naturally more sensitive or cautious and need more time to adjust.

Tips for Parents

- Create a predictable routine: Arrive and leave at the same time each day when possible. Consistency helps children feel safe.
- Keep goodbyes short and calm: Say goodbye confidently and clearly. Lingering or sneaking away can increase anxiety.
- Reassure your child: Use simple language. For example,"I'll be back after snack time."
- Practice separation at home: Short separations with trusted adults help build confidence.
- Stay positive about child care: Children pick up on your emotions—confidence from you builds confidence in them.
- The child care provider you choose matters: Ask how they will partner with you when it comes to assisting with separation anxiety. Providers should be offering warm, responsive care, comforting children with familiar routines, re-directing attention to play and friends, and providing consistency with staff and schedules.

REMEMBER: Separation anxiety is a normal developmental stage—and most children settle in within minutes after parents leave, even if drop-off is emotional. With reassurance, routine, and collaboration between parents and child care providers, children learn that they are safe and that parents always come back.

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