

Separation Anxiety

By Anisa Foy

All teachers know too well the tears and loud cries as a child starts pre-school, kindergarten or the infant toddler community. But did you know that even older children feel some anxiety about going to a new school, or going away for the first overnight stay away from home? As an elementary teacher I was very surprised when some of my sixth graders shed tears and appeared very anxious as they said their goodbyes to their parents before boarding the bus to go to Science school, which involved a staying away from home for 3 nights! Any change of routine, especially one that takes the child away from familiar surroundings is very daunting, no matter the child's age. What I came to realize after my long tenure at Arborland is that feeling some separation anxiety is normal, and it is a part of the child's development. It is a phase the child has to pass through, a part of becoming a well adjusted independent member of society. It is a phase the child will go through and adjust, and you will be surprised at how soon that happens!

Now that I have assured you, as will your child's teacher, it does not make it easier to leave with your child protesting and crying. Sometimes I think it is easier for the child than the parent. You are leaving your child with professionals who know how to comfort, distract, and help your child to calm down. But what about you, who is going to help you? You go off to work feeling guilty, thinking what a horrible parent you are, leaving your child when he/she needs you most. Dear parent, believe me, you are being the best parent in the world, you have just done a wonderful thing for your precious child, starting him/her on the path of independence.

To help you, the parent, cope with this anxiety let us examine why the child protests so vociferously, making you feel miserable and guilty. Remember when your baby was little, and you left the room the crying would start. This is because all the baby knows is its immediate family, and has not yet learned the meaning of time. The baby feels if a familiar face is missing its gone forever. Have you played peek-a-boo with a tiny baby? When you first hide your face, or go behind a door the immediate response is one of fear and nervousness. Then when you pop out there is relief which results in gales of giggles and the baby wants you to do it again and again. Why is that? I think the baby is testing to see that you will magically reappear each time. Over time the child begins to accept the fact that even if he cannot see you, you are still there and will come back. What is happening here is a normal trusting bond being developed between you and your child.

When the child first goes to school a similar new healthy bond will be formed. Now the child is entering a whole new unfamiliar place, and the insecurities will surface again. The child needs to know you are not abandoning him, that you will return. Here are ways in which you can help yourself and your child through this period.

1. Prepare your child by leaving him for short periods, maybe with a sitter or a relative, and always return within a given time frame. After a while it will feel like playing peek-a-boo, "oh yes, mommy left, but she came back soon"

2. When leaving your child at school, remain calm; do not project your anxiety on your child. Do not negotiate with your child, "Okay, just this once I will stay with you a little longer". If you do that the child will be louder the next day as he has learned that this works. Give him a quick kiss/hug goodbye, and leave immediately. Do the same thing every day, no matter how loud the protest.
3. Resist the urge to linger in the background, hide behind a pillar or a tree just to see how the child is coping. Believe me your child is with trained professionals, and if you could only see how quickly the crying stops you would be surprised. Of course some children take longer than others to settle down, and the school has plans in place to help these children. When I was new at Arborland there was one child who took longer than usual to settle down, and it took me some time to realize that instead of driving off the mother was sitting in the parking lot, the child could not see his mother but he could see the car! As long as the child knew his mother could hear the cry he continued at full volume. Please help yourself and your child and leave quickly.
4. Always tell the child who will pick him up at a given time,(example: after lunch, or after nap time) and always be there on time. This way the child will begin to realize he can trust you, and the confidence will grow.
5. Make sure the child is not hungry or tired in the mornings, as this will make him cranky. The child needs a good night's rest and a healthy breakfast before coming to school.
6. As a parent you need to develop a trust with the school and your child's teacher. Make arrangements with the teacher to call within a given time frame to check on how well the child has settled down, or request the teacher to call you.

In conclusion I would like to assure you that crying and being unwilling to part from you on the first few days of school is a very normal process in the child's development, and it is a transient, temporary phase. In the unlikely event that this phase continues on to the elementary level medical advice would be needed, and there could be other underlying reasons which would have to be looked at. In all my years of teaching I have never experienced a case where the child has not settled in to the school routine in a matter of weeks.