

Helping Children and Families with Separation

One of the hardest parts of the day in child care is when families drop their children off. This daily separation, whether new or routine, can be very upsetting for all. Child care providers can help ease this transition by providing tips for families.

Why do some children cry when dropped off? Why when picked up?

Many young children cry when entering, or leaving, childcare for many reasons. The first is that it is normal and natural for young children to resist separating from their families and is actually a sign of their attachment. Separation anxiety can be especially intense during certain developmental stages and during life changes. Most children also dislike all transitions or changes -- so children may protest at both drop-off and pick-up times. Reassure families that the reason children cry at pick up time is not to reject their families, but because they feel safe enough in their presence to express their big feelings.

Child-care providers can make it easier: Young children cry to release their frustrations and express their feelings. When providers offer children compassion and comfort when they are upset, it restores their self-confidence, builds their ability to regulate their own emotions, and buffers the many stresses that little people can face in our big world. Your attention and sympathy allows children to express themselves and connect with you emotionally so they will be able to be cooperative, flexible, and positive during the day.

Remember that separations are hard for adults too! Try to be as sensitive to the feelings of family members as you are to their children. Families often feel guilty or sad about leaving their young children and don't know how to say goodbye.

By partnering with the family and the child you can help with separation.

1. **It is important for the parent/family member to say good-bye.** Explain that when adults sneak out it undermines trust and will make separations even harder! Creating a goodbye ritual and then leaving afterwards works best for most children. For example, two kisses and a hug, or hand the child to the provider so s/he can wave to her family member out the window.
2. **As a caregiver, suggest that the parent stay** for the first 3 to 10 minutes of crying, if possible, to help with the listening work, and to establish the emotional safety of crying with the parent about separation. But encourage families to not drag out the goodbye once the child is ready – it's usually easiest for children when families exit after their

goodbye ritual.

3. **There are several benefits to listening to the child.** After a good cry, the child feels more connected to the listener so s/he is inclined to have stronger executive function and be:
 - a) Less aggressive and/or impulsive
 - b) Less withdrawn
 - c) More thoughtful in play
 - d) Better able to build meaningful relationships, and
 - e) More flexible and cooperative in general.
4. **Separation is harder for some children than others.** Children's temperaments and life experiences may make separation particularly hard for some. It may be a large issue about which they need to cry hard many times over. For these children, you can expect to see gradual, positive change as they work through their grief and fear.
5. Share other suggestions for families that may help with separation:
 - a) A **"transition object."** Bring something that reminds the child of her/his family to child care. Ideas include a blanket, stuffed animal, family photo, or something that smells like home.
 - b) Establish a **regular schedule** since predictable routines make children feel more secure. When a child comes to and from child care at the same times daily it makes the adjustment easier.
 - c) **Prepare the child ahead of time** by visiting child-care with them before returning to work so s/he can meet his teacher and explore the environment with you present. Families can also practice separations through play or books. Suggestions for books: http://www.nycaeyc.org/conf2012-handouts/Embry_Illustrated-Selection.
 - d) **Tell the child when you'll return in terms s/he understands** ("Mommy will pick you up after naptime," rather than 3 pm). Reassure her/him that Daddy (or Grandpa or Auntie May) always comes back! Be sure to call if late so the caregiver can reassure the child.
 - e) **Explain that some children object to separations more than others**— and it does not mean that their child loves his family less if s/he doesn't want to leave for home, or falls apart when you arrive. For some children, transitions are particularly hard, and children feel safe expressing their strong feelings in the presence of their parents when they are strongly attached to them. (Note: if a child doesn't want to leave because s/he seems genuinely afraid of her parent, please see Module 6: Healthy Practices regarding signs of abuse.)

References: Brinamen, C. & Page, F. (Nov, 2012). Using Relationships to Heal Trauma: Reflective Practice Creates a Therapeutic Preschool. *Young Children*, 67(5), 40-48. Siegel, D. & Hartzell, M. (2003). *Parenting from the inside out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive*. New York: Penguin/Putnam. Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines. (2012) p. 20, 32, 58. Department of Early Learning. Wipfler, P. (2006) *Building emotional understanding: A course for parents and child care professionals*. Hand in Hand Parenting. Wipfler, P. *Separation Anxiety Recovery*. <http://www.handinhandparenting.org/news/44/64/Separation-Anxiety-Recovery>