

### Supporting Children with Separation Anxiety

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Children's lives are always marked with transitions of change. Most of the changes that occur in a child's life are positive and part of growing up, such as a new baby in the family, moving up to the next group in day care, starting school, and changing houses. However there still can exist within each situation an anxiety if the child is separated from the adult he/she feels comfortable and safe with. Separation protest is a reflection of the child's fear of being separated from his or her primary caregiver. This fear can be transferred from the separation from the parent to separating from the caregiver. Most children have developed cognitively to cope with separation during stressful times. Some children may appear to regress which is initiated by a new factor occurring within their lives.

#### Suggested strategies

- **Work closely with the parents** – it is easier to establish a safe and consistent environment if the parent/s and the caregivers are working together. In consultation with the parent develop a consistent process on arrival and departure which reinforces with the child that the parent will return.
- **Connect with the parent** – initially it can be useful for the parent to provide the child with an item that belongs to the parent. The child is asked to look after that item until the parent returns at the end of the day. The item can be a piece of clothing e.g. scarf or something from the parent's bag. It is important that the child recognises that the item belongs to the parent but provide something that will not cause too much stress if lost during the day.
- **Reflect on arrival times** – observe how you and staff greet the child on arrival. Do you interact with parent; acknowledge the child is upset that Mum/Dad is leaving? Identify what you do to engage the child into the care environment. E.g. go to the window and wave goodbye, establish a routine task that you need the child's help with each morning.
- **Reinforce that the parent will return**- ensure both the parents have let told the child they will return. E.g. use the clock to say when the big hand is on ... I will be there. Reinforce that they did return like they said they would.
- **Assess your program** – identify aspects of your program that triggers stressful behaviour by the child. Modify and change to decrease these triggers. e.g. if you start to notice that the child gets upset when you leave the room provide an activity or "job" to do while you are away such as "can you set up the blocks so that they are ready when I come back"

- **Connect the child with the parent** – Aim to aim to keep connecting the child with the parent e.g. “Mummy packed a really nice lunch for you today.” Or “I really liked the shirt your Daddy was wearing .... Is my favourite colour”.
- **Sharing your care-** Provide opportunities to let the child know that you do care for him but you also care for the other children. Use activities of turn taking and sharing to reinforce this concept.
- **Communicate to child what you are doing** – continue to tell the child what you are doing even if child continues to be upset. E.g. “I am going to get ... up from his/her sleep so that we all can play together”
- **Identify child’s interests** – aim to incorporate child’s interests, likes or dislikes into the experiences you provide. Find out what the child did on the weekend or may be doing next weekend.
- **Visual Schedules-** utilise visual schedules to help the child understand what is going to happen next e.g. put my bag in my locker, go to window with adult to wave goodbye, get the buckets of crayons off the shelf to put on table or put the basket of props down near the teachers chair ready for group time.
- **Focus on relationship building through routines** –creating stable and predictable routines throughout the day lets the child know that while lots of changes may be occurring elsewhere here is a place that remains the same.
- **Support the child’s social development** –provide individual or small group activities that assist in recognising all children in the group and value their individual skills and differences. E.g. activities that require turn taking. These activities can also focus on areas of the child’s interests. When acknowledging a child ensure you say the child’s name e.g. Jack is working with the blocks just like you, Ben.
- **Provide calming activities** – create calming environments such as waterplay, bubble blowing, relaxation CD’s, quiet reading, quiet place for the child to retreat.
- **Initiate activities that encourages a child’s interest** – e.g. if a child shows interest in a topic or certain art/craft area provide these activities. Gain the child’s involvement by encouraging the child to assist in setting up these activities.

### References:

Greenman J. *“What happened to the world?”* Helping children cope in turbulent times. Pademelon Press 2002 Australia

### Disclaimer

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