

DEALING WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

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“Attachment” is the word used by child development theorists to describe a special relationship between people. Between adults and infants, a “secure” attachment is related to the child’s ability to act independently, to explore and to grow and learn from new experiences. Without a secure attachment, the child clings to the adult, is unable to do things alone, and is emotionally much more fragile. It is the *quality* of the child’s interaction with the adult, which determines whether or not the child is secure.

Most children experience, at one time or another, separation anxiety, but children between the ages of 6 and 24-months-of-age (with a peak around 20 months) tend to have the hardest time separating from a significant adult. Out-of-home caregivers should be especially sensitive to this transitional period, and help both the parents and the child through it as smoothly as possible.

WHAT PARENTS NEED:

1. Information: What to expect; what is normal.
2. What can/should they do?
3. Trust in you, the caregiver.
4. Honest, ongoing information on the process.

WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS:

1. One person who regularly takes care of him/her.
2. A caregiver that is sensitive to each child’s needs.
3. Consistent care, nurturing and acceptance.
4. An environment that is set up so that each child can find an appropriate level of stimulation and comfort.

WHEN THERE ARE PROBLEMS:

1. Be sure the parents are not showing ambivalent feelings.
2. Monitor the separation process:
 - Is the “good-bye” too long?
 - Are the parents leaving too quickly?
 - Is the routine consistent?
 - Are you available to the child?
3. Are you trying too hard to “settle the child”?
4. Are you trying new things too quickly to give them time to work?

REMEMBER: The child can feel your tension (irritation, frustration). YOU have to be calm and relaxed if you want them to be!

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Show sincere interest in each child
2. Tell the parent what to expect - that the child will probably cry - that how the parent feels will make a difference in how the child feels.
3. Tell the parents not to be ambivalent.
4. Provide freedom for the child to explore.
5. Give the child a choice: Do you want to go to your teacher or do you want to get down.
6. Tell the parent to always tell the child good-bye. Give the parent choices on handling the child. Tell the parent to leave and not come back in the room or look in the room until the end of the day. Parents can come to the office or call and will check on their child.
7. Handle each child with great sensitivity.
8. A sad child can be comforted.
9. An angry child is more difficult. In dealing with an angry child, find out if the child wants to be held. Stay calm. Tell the child that when he is feeling better you will come back. Keep checking on the child.
10. Transition objects: Is there something the child likes to have or hold.
11. Parents who can't make the break:
 - Talk to the parent one on one.
 - Is this what you want for your child?
 - Why is this so hard for you?
 - You are passing your feeling on to your child.