

Mommy, Don't Go!

Handling Separation Anxiety

By Heather Johnson Durocher



Nann Ashford remembers all too clearly the heart-wrenching mornings she endured sending her son off to preschool. Teachers told Ashford that her son was fine once he arrived, but she still felt uneasy about the situation. "At home he wouldn't talk about [what he did at preschool] and that scared me," she says.

She also couldn't ignore her son's behavior at daycare later in the day. "He wouldn't nap and he was disruptive," she says, adding that his exhaustion made for chaotic evenings at home.

Alex was experiencing separation anxiety, which behavior experts say is normal, and even healthy, for preschoolers.

Just a Stage

"It's a developmental step that parents have to work through," says Susan Sundeen, an early childhood family education instructor in Woodbury, Minn. "Your child is, all of a sudden, discovering they are separate from you."

A child may show his distress by becoming apprehensive about entering a new setting, not making eye contact with the teacher or caregiver, clinging to his parent or possibly throwing a temper tantrum.

"My sense is it is often a function of a child's personality and temperament," says Barbara Willer, deputy executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Some children adapt rather quickly while others are "a little more shy, a little more cautious about new situations," she says.

Ashford discovered that her son fell into the latter category. After a month of frustrating mornings, she decided something had to change to make life easier for Alex – and herself. A more consistent schedule did the trick. She placed him into a new daycare providing in-house preschool every day. Ashford found that Alex's behavior changed for the better when he wasn't attending preschool only three mornings a week and at a place separate from his daycare.

Separation anxiety can be rough going for a family. Parents may wonder how long their child's behavior will last, what they could be doing differently or if their child is even ready for more independence. Whether the child is beginning daycare, starting preschool or experiencing another new group setting without Mom or Dad, experts say recognizing children for who they are is critical.

"It's important to pick up the clues from your children and be respectful of that," says Sundeen. For example, parents should take notice of how their child reacts to different situations. Is she someone who can easily join a group of unfamiliar people? Is he the type to slowly warm up to new people? Based on these observations, parents can help make the transition from home to school or home to daycare a smoother one.

Prepare Everyone

Sundeen suggests talking with your children about what to expect: where the school or daycare is located, what activities they'll be engaging in, when Mommy or Daddy will be back, etc. "When they don't know what is happening is when the separation becomes the most difficult," she says.

Practicing the separation beforehand – at home by using toys or books or leaving the room where your child is playing and then returning – is another good idea.

Debbie Bush from Interlochen, Mich., says keeping track of the days remaining before school began using a calendar and stickers helped her 4-year-old son, Alex, look forward to preschool. "The first time we went he was real clingy with me," says Bush. "After that he did really well."

Preparation goes both ways. "Parents have a tough time separating, too," says Sundeen. "Parents need to think through [how they'll react] because children can sense any tension. You really have to think through the feelings the child is taking from you."

Communicate With the Teacher

"It's really a team effort," says Willer. Teachers and caregivers can offer insight into how a child is adjusting as well as brainstorm different strategies if problems persist. They also could offer advice on seeking further help if the child seems especially troubled, Willer says. "Typically you can try different adaptations that make this a successful situation."

Sundeen and Willer agree that allowing a child to bring something special into the classroom or daycare may calm their fears.

"I've had kids come to class with pictures of their parents and that's made all the difference in the world," says Sundeen. She's even had children make picture books during class to help them make the connection of home and school.

Even something small that they could keep in their pocket – a stone or a building block – may ease their minds, Willer says. "Talk to the child and find out what is special to them."

Interact With Other Families

Willer suggests connecting with parents of children who will be in the same setting. Introducing children with a soon-to-be classmate or playmate may make them feel a little more comfortable when the program begins.

Bush says this was another factor in her son's positive transition into preschool. Another child at his daycare was enrolled in the same preschool program, which provided him with a familiar face.

Say Good-bye – And Mean It

As tough as it may be, parents must not prolong their good-byes. Keep it simple and try establishing a ritual, such as two kisses and a hug. "Always tell your child that you are leaving," says Sundeen. "[Parents] may think it would be easier not to, but it's only easier for the parent."

It's important for a parent to inform their child when they'll return, too. Rather than say, "I'll be back in two hours," which a preschooler wouldn't grasp, parents should run through the sequence of events. Tell them pick-up time is after they play, hear a story and have a snack, for example.

Willer also suggests letting a child know what comes after preschool. "I wouldn't plan for either bribes or rewards, but if you want to plan that after you'll do something that is special – going to the library, taking a walk – it's often a way for them to look forward to something," she says.

As challenging as separation anxiety may be, Sundeen and Willer say the problem most likely will pass before too long.

As Ashford discovered, a positive outcome is possible. Parents need to work with their child. "Let them know what is happening, what is going on, as simply and thoroughly as you can and answer their questions," she says. "Sometimes he has clingy mornings and he wants a few extra hugs, but things are a lot better now."