

HOW TO DEAL WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY IN CHILDCARE

By Samantha Page

Samantha Page offers advice to help ease the transition into childcare for both parents and children.

Attending an early-learning program such as long day care, pre-school or family day care is an important and exciting stage in a child's development. They will have opportunities to interact with other children and educators, and benefit from a stimulating learning environment.

Some children embrace this change with an enthusiasm that can leave parents feeling confident and comfortable, and perhaps even a little left out. Other children may feel afraid, upset or anxious. It may be the first time they have been in the care of adults who are not part of their family, or the environment could be noisy and crowded compared to being at home, making it all feel a bit too much.

It is actually quite common for children to show some signs of discomfort when they first start in a new program. From about six months old, most children begin to show distress when they are away from their parents or carers, as they don't yet have a separate sense of self, so can feel a part of them is missing. While this can be worrying for parents and carers, it is normal for children to find the transition to childcare upsetting, and important to remember the distress is often short-lived.

There are a number of easy things you can do to help your child settle into the new environment.

Behaviour To Look Out For

Not every child will find being away from their parents or carers upsetting, and not every child will respond in the same way. When children are upset, they can express this in a number of different ways:

- Some may be visibly upset, and will cry or call out.
- Some may have physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea or tummy aches.
- Some may appear nervous, restless, clingy, or quiet and withdrawn.

What Is Your Child Thinking?

When being separated from you upsets your child, it might be because they don't understand when you will come back or may feel anxious around unfamiliar people or places. Common thoughts children have in this situation are:

- 'I don't feel safe without my mum or dad.'
- 'Something bad will happen and I may never see them again.'
- 'I'm scared and don't know what to do.'

What You Should Do

1. Prepare Your Child

- Visit the new early-childhood service with your child before they start.
- Keep the first few days at the service short and then build up the hours over time.
- Talk to your child about what will happen when they go to the service, reassure them you will be back, and talk about what you can do when you see each other again.

2. Work Together With The Childcare Provider

- Keep staff at your early-childhood service informed about what is happening in your home that might affect how your child is feeling.

3. Build Trust

- Make sure you say goodbye to your child and let them know when you will be back. Try to keep the 'goodbye' short, as lengthy goodbyes can make children more upset.
- Don't ignore your child's distress – respond and comfort them. The important thing is to find a balance between supporting your child and giving them the chance to get experience managing how they feel.

4. Build Feelings Of Safety

- Try and be as calm as possible. If you are calm, your child will feel more secure.
- Start playing a game or doing an activity that your child likes with them before leaving.
- Build a regular routine around drop-off and pick-up so your child feels secure and is able to predict when you will come back. Share a 'high five', special goodbye hug, or some funny or loving gestures such as 'bear hugs' as a regular goodbye routine.

5. Reconnect

- When you pick up your child, spend extra time with them to reconnect again.
- Bring a favourite toy or a photo from home to help give your child a feeling of security and familiarity.
- Talk with your child about their day and what they enjoyed.

If your child doesn't seem to be settling down over a period of a few weeks or seems to be regressing in some ways, don't panic. Talk to the service's staff, who will be able to give you insight into your child's experience and how they are responding to the new environment. Staff may suggest additional strategies to assist your child through the transition into care. In some cases, it may be appropriate to try an alternative service type or reduce hours until your child is comfortable, but this is rarely necessary.

Pay Attention To Your Own Feelings

Don't forget that it's not just children who can find separation upsetting. It's also normal for parents to find the process distressing and you should make sure you have strategies to deal with this as well.

You can minimise your concerns by:

- Calling the childcare service about half an hour after leaving to see how your child is going.
- Asking staff questions about your child's day, such as how they slept or what they enjoyed.

Samantha Page is the CEO of Early Childhood Australia