

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

By Bev Bos

Every time I have to leave home and travel to another state to do a workshop for teachers or parents I suffer from separation anxiety. The few hours before I leave are often tense. I am hoping I have remembered everything. Will the plane be on time? And what about the connection? Will they like what I have to say? What will their questions be? I have given over 5,000 workshops and still I have separation anxiety. I remember being in the San Francisco airport one night. The plane had been delayed over and over in Portland. Guess what? They were having a family celebration and I could hear the laughter and fun over the phone. Quiet tears rolled down my cheeks. I do love what I do and once I am at my destination there is joy, satisfaction and fun, but getting there is so hard sometimes.

Separation anxiety is lifelong. Certainly, as adults, we get better at handling the tension. When I go to visit my mother I always feel sad when I leave. All adults need to close their eyes for just a moment and think back to a time when they had to leave someone dear and how that felt. Remember when you graduated from high school—the joy of celebration and, yet, the sadness because you would not see many of these friends daily again. What helped us through that time? Certainly not someone saying: “You’ll be fine.” “Don’t worry.” “Just find a friend and go play.”

So many of the times that are difficult for children have to do with separation. Going to bed is separation and is often the number one source of anxiety in children. Some young children can be terrified as Mom and Dad walk out of the room. Separation again. What parents need to understand more than anything else is that how children react to separation is a varied as children themselves. At certain ages, certain fears are fairly predictable. For example:

2 years: Auditory fears; big trucks, thunder, flushing of the toilet, mother’s departure at bedtime or school time.

3 years: Visual fears predominate; “boogieman”, policeman, mom or dad going out at night.

4 years: Auditory fears predominate; fire engines and Mother going out at night.

Notice that Mom and/or Dad leaving is a fairly consistent fear in early childhood. We must respect the child’s fears above all and not humiliate or embarrass them. So what can we do when our child must be in childcare or we have chosen preschool for them?

1. Your child's temperament will play a big part in the ease or difficulty of the separation. For some children each new situation will bring questions and new feelings of anxiety. Other children love the challenge of meeting new friends and seeing new things. Someone reading this article will say: "But my child is going to kindergarten. Isn't that too old to be having separation anxiety?" Depending on the child, they could still be anxious when they leave for college. Obviously, they should be able to cope better at eighteen than at five, but the feelings can still be there.
2. Be absolutely comfortable with the preschool or childcare center you have chosen for your child. If you have misgivings your child is certain to sense your feelings. Obviously, no place is quite like home but there are many choices. Childhood is a precious time and worth a few weeks of research.
3. At our preschool I tell parents to stay with their child until the child asks them to leave. If you can do that, please do. That DOES NOT mean that you should cling to your child. A child can always sense your uncertainty—stay close and be available but do not cling.
4. Be really clear with the Director or Teacher of your child about how you feel. I do not like it when teachers say, "Oh, she'll be fine." What does that mean? Does that mean it doesn't matter if the child cries? Do not let anyone make you feel uncomfortable with your feelings about leaving your child. Certainly, teachers have had lots of experience with parent-child separation and can express their views and you should listen but you should never feel uncomfortable.

I tell parents two things: "Stay until your child is comfortable." When you know it is time you leave, be very CLEAR when talking to your child: "I will be back in fifteen minutes or two hours." Young children do not have a very good sense of time. AND, do not turn around and come back at the first whimper. It says to the child you are not sure this is the right thing to do and your uncertainty will make separation more difficult. I also tell parents that if I sense that the child is ready and the parent is not, I will encourage them to go. I promise to call if it is really difficult for their child.

5. At most childcare centers and preschools there is more than one teacher. Often, there is an assistant teacher or other parents to help. One thing I do when a child walks in is glance at the parent. If the parent has a totally different personality from mine, I motion

to my assistant teacher to come and stand close. In other words, until the child is really comfortable, a caregiver with a personality closer to Mom sometimes makes the separation easier. Obviously, sometimes there is not a choice.

6. ALWAYS allow the child to bring their blankets, their teddy bears, their most favorite things to the center. If it is a blanket, sometimes you can cut a little piece and put it in their pocket if they think they will be embarrassed. I know a Mom who put a dab of her perfume on the child's blanket and when the child felt lonely he'd smell the blanket and feel closer to Mom.
7. The more a child can talk about their fears, the easier it becomes to cope with them. When children know ahead of time what's going to happen and not happen, they can think about and get used to their feelings about it. This does not mean the child will have the right to make the decision about the school or the childcare center. I mean they have the right to their feelings. A quiet conversation, kind of a rehearsal, about the way it's going to go often allows the child the opportunity to express their feelings. "When we get up we will have breakfast, then get dressed—you can pick what you want to wear—and we will drive this way and that—and then we will come to the red school house and teacher Sally will be waiting." Do not say this in one breath; provide quiet moments for the child to respond. Listen!
8. How our parents help us deal with our earliest experiences can affect how we react in situations the rest of our lives. One of the great opportunities of parenthood is to help our children understand their feelings and help them grow into healthy children who understand their fears and feelings.