

Understanding and managing separation distress

Why can separating from parents and carers be distressing for young children?

From around six months, most children begin to show distress when they are away from their primary caregivers. As they don't yet have a separate sense of self, babies see their parents or carers as part of themselves and feel a part of them is missing when they are apart. Babies may not understand you will come back after leaving them. Babies and young children may also feel anxious around unfamiliar people, though this may reduce over time. As children feel less intense separation distress and their familiarity with their early childhood service increases, they tend to worry less. Older children have developed a separate sense of self and therefore have a greater understanding their parents or carers will return.



Adults can help reduce children's fear of separation from parents and carers by reassuring and comforting them.

Helping manage separation distress

Children vary in their levels of emotional sensitivity. Some children worry while others are more carefree. Most are somewhere in between. Parents and carers can work together with staff so their child has positive goodbyes and enjoys their time away from home (e.g., when a parent or carer reminds their child of the fun they have with their friends at child care). Children feel less distressed when they are confident that they will see their parents or carers again (e.g., when a parent or carer reassures their child that they will see them at the end of the day).

When children are separating from their parents and carers they may behave in hard to manage ways (e.g., screaming, tantrums, or refusal). Understanding the meaning behind this behaviour and responding appropriately assists the child to manage their emotions and experience less distress (e.g., by speaking softly to the child about their feelings, stroking their hair and providing a comforting hug). Children copy their parents' and carers' emotions and behaviours. Children may interpret adults' anxiety or worry as indicating to them that their situation is unsafe and that they should be fearful too (e.g., 'the world is a dangerous place and I am not capable to handle it on my own').

Adults can help children manage their separation distress and help them feel safe by being calm, relaxed and reassuring, noticing their child's emotions and comforting them. A balance is required however. For adults, it is important to find the balance between supporting and reassuring children and allowing children to have opportunities to practise managing their own emotions. By being emotionally available and showing understanding about children's fears, you help to manage children's distress when it is too big for them to manage on their own.



Children's separation distress can be due to ...	Adults can help reduce the child's distress by ...
<p>The way the child thinks</p> <p><i>'I don't feel safe without my Mum or Dad.'</i></p> <p><i>'Something bad will happen and I may never see them again.'</i></p>	<p>Supporting your child to develop helpful thinking and remind them of what usually happens when you are away from each other.</p> <p><i>'You can trust me to make sure that you are safe.'</i></p> <p><i>'When I leave you, you are ok and I'll come back for you.'</i></p>
<p>How they cope with feeling afraid</p> <p><i>'I am scared and I don't know what to do.'</i></p>	<p>Giving your child some ways to cope when they are apart from you</p> <p><i>'Here is a kiss for you to keep in your pocket until I come back.'</i></p> <p><i>'Here is a photo of us together to remind you that we will be together again soon.'</i></p> <p><i>'Let's take some deep breaths to calm us down.'</i></p>
<p>Picking up on parents' and carers' cues</p> <p><i>'Mummy looks worried and upset so there must be something wrong. Now I feel worried or scared too!'</i></p>	<p>Being calm and helping your child to be calm too</p> <p><i>'Mummy seems happy and relaxed. Seems like everything is ok. I feel safe. There is nothing to worry about.'</i></p>



Understanding children's separation distress

When a child gets angry, upset or worried and their behaviour is hard to manage, try to think about what may be going on for the child. Some common experiences, possible explanations and suggestions are described below.

Some common experiences	Possible explanations	Some suggestions to try
Baby Hamish has been happy at child care since he was six months old. At 10 months he started becoming upset when separating from his father in the mornings.	Hamish is attached to his dad and has developed the capacity to remember and recognise familiar faces. He sees others as strangers.	Hamish may feel less distressed if he has a special toy or blanket to help him feel connected to his dad when they are apart.
Three-year-old Ruby is screaming and clinging to her mother, not letting her go.	Ruby has a close attachment to her mother. If her mother feels anxious and Ruby has picked up on this, she may feel scared and unsafe.	Practise being calm. Talk with staff about your feelings. Think about transition times (e.g., find a special way to say goodbye to Ruby in the morning and reunite later in the day, and try to use this consistently).
Four-year-old Jarek won't get out of bed. 'I have a tummy ache.' He is usually very happy to go to Kindergarten. He has a new baby brother.	It is not unusual for children who have settled well in their early childhood service to experience distress in response to changes in their life.	Talk with Jarek about how he is feeling and use this opportunity to remind him of his importance in his family. Perhaps Jarek could show his friends some photos of his new, bigger family.

Parents and carers have feelings too

Parents and carers can also feel upset and experience distress when they separate from their child, especially when their child is upset. Parents and carers can help manage their own emotions by:

- ▶ calling the service about half an hour after leaving to see how their child is going.
- ▶ asking questions about their child's day, such as how they slept or what they enjoyed. Parents and carers can ask specific questions if they want more information or if they are feeling a little anxious themselves.
- ▶ making sure you pay attention to your own emotions. For more information on self care, refer to the KidsMatter resource sheet 'Positive mental health for parents and carers'.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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A voice for young children



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