



Separation Distress

Supporting trusting relationships

Background

Tearful goodbyes are common during a child's earliest years. Separation distress is a perfectly normal part of childhood development and often starts around 6 months of age. Understanding what your child is going through and having a few strategies in place can help both child and family move through this period as smoothly as possible.

0 – 6 months	6 – 12 months
Children under 6 months completely identify with their primary caregiver. They don't really think about themselves, only what they immediately need: food, love and attention. Young baby's primary focus is gaining control over their basic movements. First signs of independence start to emerge around 4 months of age, which is when babies learn that when they cry it gets your attention. Crying is a baby's primary tool for communicating their needs. Young babies learn that how they behave can have an impact on others, namely their primary caregiver.	Around 7 months of age babies start to realise they are independent from their primary caregivers. This is a big cognitive leap. This new understanding brings with it some anxiety, so leaving your baby alone even if only for a minute can cause tears. They do not have the information yet that you will come back. So sneaking away does not help either, this can often make babies more anxious. Be sure to say goodbye so that your baby can visually see you leave.
12 – 24 months	2 – 3 years
Young children's merging sense of self is still developing. Experience and routine goodbyes have enabled your young child to start to trust that you come back upon saying goodbye. The strong sense of trust that develops supports young children to venture out from you and develop their confidence.	Toddlers continue to struggle for their independence but throughout their seemingly confident exploration if something unpredictable occurs they are quick to fly back into the arms of their primary caregiver. Establishing consistent routines for farewells ensures your toddler can trust in your return.

What Triggers Separation Distress?

It is not always possible to identify a cause for separation distress in children however the following points offer some common triggers for children

- Developmental stage
- Being separated from a parent
- Major changes in home life ie: moving house, divorce, death in a family
- As a child's primary caregiver children are attuned to your response to separation and will react accordingly
- Starting new at childcare, moving classrooms and/or new educators

During the separation period your child is learning about how to develop healthy attachments to others, trust others whilst also developing skills for being resilient and independent explorers – so working closely with educators is important.

Making Goodbyes Easier

Practice

Introduce new people and places whilst practicing in short intervals being apart. If your planning on going out in the evening invite the babysitter over earlier so they can spend time together. When starting at the HEY where possible try to come and do some orientation visits before you leave your child on their first day.

Calm & Consistent

Create a departure ritual with your child when dropping off at childcare, talk about this in the car on the way. Stay calm and confident in your child when leaving, this will be reassuring to them even though they may be upset. Use concepts like I'll see you after lunch to help your measure when you will return.

Timing is Everything

Being aware of children's needs for sleep and food and trying to do departures outside of these times. Try to have a few minutes to settle your child at an experience or with an educator before having to leave when dropping off at childcare.

Follow Through

Try to always return when you promise to. This is important in establishing your child's trust which they will in time come to feel assured of your return.

Books to support children explore goodbye's & Separation Anxiety

- Owl Babies by Martin Waddell
- The Goodbye Book by Judith Viorst
- Benjamin Comes Back by Amy Brandt