

Positive Parenting of Preschoolers

Separation Problems

All children have to learn to cope with temporary separations from their parents. Learning to be apart can be difficult for parents and children. However, parents need time to themselves occasionally and children benefit from spending time with other people. Shyness around new people and anxiety about separation from parents is common in preschoolers. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler to mix with others and calmly separate from you.

There is no evidence that day care or child minding has bad effects on children, as long as it is provided by competent caregivers in a caring manner. It is important to have a consistent daily routine with the same caregiver where possible.

What Are Separation Problems?

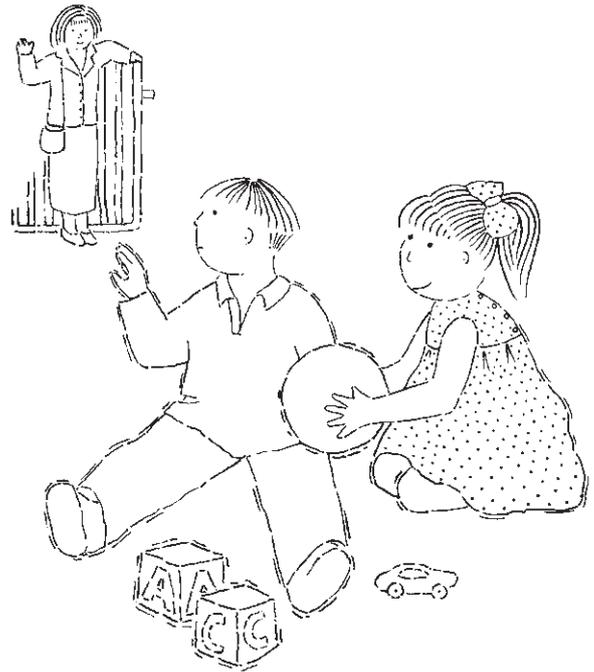
When being left with caregivers, some children cling, cry and protest when their parents try to leave. They may appear terrified at the thought of their parents leaving. Preschoolers may also burst into tears when their parents return. Parents can feel guilty or worried about leaving their child with other caregivers.

Why Do Children Have Problems Separating From Their Parents?

Preschoolers may have fears about letting their parents out of their sight. They may worry that their parents are not coming back or be concerned for their safety. These types of fears are common at times of family stress, such as moving house, family illness or relationship problems.

Giving in and never going out alone because of children's reactions to being left with others encourages clingy behaviour. Rather than easing children's anxiety, this can make it worse. Children need opportunities to learn how to separate from their parents.

Problems can be made worse by the way the separation takes place. Giving children a lot of attention, comfort and reassurance when they protest may accidentally reward problem behaviour and lead to more protesting in the future. On the other hand, rushing in to drop off children and then rushing out can increase children's anxiety.



How To Set Up for Success

Prepare Your Child Ahead of Time

Before starting at a kindergarten, preschool, day care or child minding centre, talk about it with your child. Visit the centre together so your child feels comfortable there. Stay close by and allow your child to watch the other children. Do not force your child to join in activities. If possible, visit several times and stay a little longer each time.

Meet with relatives or friends on several occasions before leaving your child with them. This will give your child time to get to know them and feel comfortable. If your child is joining a group, invite another child from the group to your home. Your child will get to know them and can look for them in the group.

Tell Your Child What To Expect

Prepare your child for the separation by explaining where they are going, where you are going and when you will return. Try to link the time of your return with something your child will understand—*Ellen, I will be home after you have had dinner* or *When you wake up after your sleep, I'll be back.*

Get Everything Ready

Make sure you have everything that the caregiver needs to take care of your child such as clothes, equipment or medicine. Suggest that your child take along a special toy or other comforting item from home. You can also leave something of your own with your child to reassure them that you will come back.

Prepare the Caregiver

Provide the caregiver with a written list of any special needs or routines. Always leave a contact number in case of emergencies. Tell the caregiver that you will leave when you say goodbye, even if your child is upset or protesting. You can ask the caregiver to note how long it takes for your child to settle down after you leave.

Problems can occur if there is no agreement about who should manage misbehaviour at times when both the parent and caregiver are present. Decide ahead of time who is to be responsible for discipline at drop off and pick up times. Misbehaviour may occur if consequences are inconsistent or parents and caregivers talk for a long time without attending to the child.

How To Teach Your Child To Be Calm when You Leave

Explain the Steps

Develop a routine for when you are leaving your child with others. Discuss it with your child. Here is an example:

- Say hello to the caregiver and other children.
- Find something to do.
- Kiss Mum or Dad and say goodbye.

Ask your child to tell you the steps before you leave home. If your child cannot tell you, explain the routine. Answer any questions.

Introduce Others to Your Child

Many preschoolers need their parents to help them settle into new situations. Introduce your child to new adults and children. Spend some time talking to other adults and playing with the children.

Set Your Child Up in an Activity

Suggest something your child might like to do. Help your child get started in an activity alone or with one or two others rather than in a large group. Try to make it more rewarding to be involved in an activity than clinging to you. To do this, praise your child for mixing with others and ignore clingy behaviour.

Say Goodbye and Leave

When it is time for you to leave, remind your child where you are going and when you will return. Do not leave without your child knowing. Calmly and confidently say goodbye to them and leave. Ignore protests and do not go back. If you are worried, you may like to telephone the caregiver to check that your child has settled.

When You Return

Greet Your Child

Spend some individual time with your child. Ask questions about what they did while you were away. Be prepared for your child to be a bit clingy—this is common after separations. If the caregiver tells you about something interesting your child has done, show an interest and praise your child's efforts.

Review the Steps

Praise your child for staying calm and following the steps when you left. If necessary, briefly and calmly describe one step your child forgot to follow. Set a goal for next time—*Patrick, you were very good at saying hello to the other children today. Next time I leave you at preschool let's see if you can remember to let go of my hand and find something to play with.*

Key Steps

- Prepare your child ahead of time.
- Tell your child where you are going and when you will return.
- Prepare the caregiver.
- Develop a routine and explain the steps to your child.
- Introduce others to your child.
- Help your child find something to do.
- Praise your child for playing or mixing with others.
- Say goodbye and leave.
- Greet your child and praise them when you return.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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