

Separation Anxiety

Change is difficult even for the most robust of us. You or your child may be experiencing a little separation anxiety as we all start our new school year and there are so many new things to get used to. Separation anxiety is defined as “a distress reaction to the absence of the parent or caregiver” and in the case of adults, can be described as “any similar reaction in later life caused by separation from familiar surroundings or close friends or family.” A child trying to understand a new situation and when grappling with this new understanding, their feelings can turn to fear.

Teachers are well practised in reassuring your child, in distracting and caring for your child. Your child’s teacher will contact you if your child becomes overly distressed and will not calm (very unusual situation). Children show separation anxiety in a number of ways and not necessarily by crying at the point of separation. Sometimes they may even appear anxious and a little distressed at the end of the day when you meet up again. This is more of a sense of relief that you have come back, but it is still related to their fear of separation.

Parents often feel anxious for their children’s start at school, at a new school or in the new year group at school. Children are very perceptive as we all know and will easily pick up on an adult’s mood and worry. When entering unknown territory, of course fears will surface.

Here are a few ideas for encouraging healthy separation and independence:

- Reassure your child the time you will collect them and be on time
- Stay calm when separating, use positive talk
- Find an activity in the room you know your child enjoys and give a choice so he or she will feel more comfortable and have an element of control
- Create a simple good bye ritual
- Leave your child with the teacher if distressed or a friend if just feeling nervous
- Leave quickly being sure not to stall the leaving process
- Be assured that the school will contact you if your child does not settle and if the not knowing is very worrying for you, phone the school
- Talk about your child’s worries, name the feelings, show that you understand and at the same time reassure your child that other children feel the same way and it is normal
- Praise your child’s efforts – even the smallest effort – eg. walking from the door to the teacher without you
- Initiate conversations which involve positive feelings, talk about excitement rather than nervousness, happiness rather than concern and worry

- For young children picture books on this theme may be helpful – The Goodbye Book by Judith Viorst, The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn, Benjamin Comes Back by Amy Brandt

Gai and Andrea

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au

SMC Counsellors