

## 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 capable 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.

### 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.

Problems can occur when parents feel guilty or worried about leaving their child with other caregivers. It is not helpful to give in and never go out alone because of children's reactions to being left with others. Clingy behaviour is likely to continue if children have few 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 HELP PREVENT PROBLEMS WHEN YOU LEAVE YOUR CHILD

#### ▼ 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 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.

On the day, explain to your child 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 to pick you up.*

#### ▼ 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.

#### ▼ Explain the Steps

Develop a routine for when you are leaving your child with others. Discuss it with your child. After a while your preschooler will be able to say what the steps are. Here is an example:

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

Explain to your child that you will leave when you say goodbye even if they do not want you to go.

Before you leave home, ask your child to tell you the steps — *Now, can you remember the steps for when we go to preschool?* Praise them if they tell you. If your child does not tell you the steps, calmly explain the routine. Answer any questions.

If there were problems last time you left your child with other caregivers, briefly and calmly describe one step your child forgot to follow. Tell your child what you would like them to do differently this time — *Last time Daddy dropped you off at preschool, you forgot our step about saying goodbye and letting go of Daddy. Today, let's see if you can remember to say goodbye and let go of me.*



### ▼ Talk About Rewards

For the first few times, you may like to reward your child for following the steps. Tell your child what they can earn if they follow the steps. Suggested rewards include stopping at the park on the way home or a special game with Mum or Dad.

### ▼ 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

### ▼ 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 when they mix with others. 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

Tell your child what you liked about their behaviour when you left them with other caregivers — *Patrick, you were very good at saying hello to the other children today.* If your child

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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followed the steps, praise them and give them the reward you agreed on earlier. If problems occurred, do not give the reward. Briefly and calmly describe one step your child forgot to follow — *You forgot our rule about letting go of my hand and finding something to play with.* Set a goal for next time — *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.
- Develop a routine and explain the steps to your child.
- Talk about rewards.
- Prepare the caregiver.
- 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—ignore protests and do not go back.
- When you return, greet your child and spend time with them.
- Review the steps with your child.

As your child learns to mix with others and calmly separate from you, you will not need to remind them of the steps and rewards every time you leave them. Even though you will discuss the steps less often, they will still apply. Be consistent and leave when you say goodbye. Gradually make rewards less predictable by giving them every now and then. Continue to praise your child for calmly separating from you.