

Positive goodbyes: Helping children and families to manage separations

by Anne Stonehouse

The separations that happen when children begin coming to child care, as well as the daily separations that occur once they are settled and secure, are important parts of the day. They contribute significantly to both the quality of the child's experience and the family's feelings about their child being in care.

In developmental psychology the term 'separation anxiety' is often used to describe very young children's behaviour in traditional research situations involving separation. 'Distress at separation' may be a more appropriate way to think about what occurs in the frequent separations from loved ones that occur in child care. Varying degrees of distress at separation are common for many children when they start child care, and for some even after they are settled. It is important to acknowledge that many parents also feel upset when separating, because of their child's distress, their own feelings, or a combination of both.

Why is separating difficult?

Strong, secure attachment relationships are the foundation for children's wellbeing. Once those relationships form in the first year of life, the presence of the person or people the child is attached to is important to the child, especially in new situations. Even after a child becomes familiar with new people and forms additional relationships, separating can be difficult.

Around the middle of the first year of life children become more sensitive to the difference between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. Many children react negatively to what is unfamiliar, for example, to foods, sounds, places and especially people. This is a predictable milestone that shows babies' developing cognitive skills. Being upset when coming to child care and separating from a loved one is normal for many children.

Separating can also be difficult for young children because they have little sense of time. Adults may know how long a separation will last, but a young child has little or no understanding of this, and a few hours is a long time for a child. Adults may also contribute to the uncertainty by the loose use

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1 – 1.3, 1.5, 2.1 – 2.3, 3.1, 3.3 and 3.4

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2 and 4.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1 – 1.5, 2.1 – 2.3, 4.1 and 4.2

of words such as 'soon', which may sometimes be used to mean 'in a few minutes' or at other times to mean several hours, days or even weeks.

Young children are figuring out how the world works, and until they have the repeated experience of being left and the parent returning, they don't know that a separation is only temporary. They only know that they are without the people they care about the most.

An additional reason for distress at separation is simply that young children often become immersed in the present and may resist change, especially if it is abrupt. The change from being at home with family to being in child care may be too hurried or unwelcome simply because it is a change.

How do separations affect children and what affects how they react?

Distress at separation in child care is unpleasant not only for the child but also their parent/s, professionals and possibly other children. If not dealt with constructively, the child is likely to feel insecure and unhappy, preventing engagement with the people, materials and experiences in care. Persistent distress creates a stressful atmosphere that affects other children. However, if handled well, separating can be a positive learning experience that contributes to a child's resilience, independence, sense of agency and belonging to a group as well as to their family.

The way separations are managed can also contribute to a family's relationship with their child, their relationship with child care professionals, and their feelings of comfort and satisfaction with their child's care experience.

Reactions to separating in child care will vary according to:

- The child's stage of development, temperament, health and wellbeing
- Past experiences of separating
- Familiarity with the situation the child is coming into and relationships with the people he or she is being left with
- Help provided by others.

Age or developmental level may affect reactions to separation. Generally, older children find it easier to separate than younger children because of greater independence, increased skills to form additional relationships, more experience of separations and greater understanding of what is happening. They also have more skills and strategies to deal with feelings about separating, and the ability to use language to talk about their feelings and to gain reassurance.

While distress at separation is more likely to occur when a situation is new – that is, when a child first begins coming to child care it may reappear after the child is settled, sometimes for no obvious reason. This may be due to the child's increased awareness of the length of the separation, not wanting to miss out on something interesting at home (for example, a house guest or a new baby), a reaction to the absence of a family member or a recent reunion with someone they have missed, feeling tired or unwell, or simply that the transition and farewell have been rushed and not satisfying.

A change in the child care situation, such as new staff members or children, or the absence of a familiar staff member or friend, can also cause the child to be unsettled.

There is a difference between distress at separating that lasts only a short time and sustained distress over days and weeks. The latter is a cause for concern and requires focussed efforts to deal with it. Parting with a loved one is not usually a pleasant experience, even for adults, and it is normal for a child to be briefly distressed. Getting over the distress soon after a parent leaves does not mean that the feeling wasn't genuine at the time.

How do separations affect families?

Leaving a distressed child is upsetting for families. They will worry about what the distress means and if their child will be helped.



Parents may have difficulty separating for a variety of reasons. These can include:

- Ambivalence about having their child in care
- Concern that the child's relationships in child care will affect the parent-child relationship
- Anxiety because their child is different in some way and concern about the effect this difference may have
- General uncertainty about the quality of their child's experience at care.

Some parents may be reluctant to leave because their child is distressed, while others may want to avoid the situation by leaving without saying goodbye to the child. Some parents may be bothered by the fact that their child is not distressed as they want signs that their child will miss them.

How can child care professionals support families and children with separation?

From the start:

- Let parents know that distress at separation is common, although it varies from child to child. Reassure them that helping children and families separate positively is a priority for the service. Also let them know that it is normal for them to feel a bit anxious
- Encourage families to share their ideas about what will help their child separate successfully and what will help them to feel more comfortable when leaving their child
- If the child is coming part-time and there is flexibility, discuss with the family the advantages of the child attending consecutive days rather than days spread out over the week

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- Get as much information about the child from the family as possible. Send clear messages that you want to know what the family wants and what they may be concerned about
- Encourage the parents to visit the service with their child before the child starts attending
- Suggest that the child brings a special blanket, toy or family photo, or any security object that may remind them of family and home to child care
- Negotiate a settling in process with the family. Help them to appreciate its importance, but recognise that the amount of time families can spend on settling in will vary
- During the settling period, if possible, have the child attend for shorter amounts of time
- Be sure to use the time while the parent is present with the child to build a relationship with both parent and child. Don't leave them on their own
- In a centre, try to have one person spend most of the time with the child until he or she feels secure – in other words, use an initial relationship as a base for building others.
- Give families lots of messages, in a variety of ways, that they are the most important people in their children's lives
- Be prepared for children's arrivals. Having interesting materials or experiences to go to immediately when they arrive helps children make the transition into care. Be accessible to welcome children and families and help them separate
- Operate with the understanding that there are no 'magic solutions' to eliminate distress at separations, and communicate this to families. Although there are many useful points to keep in mind and put into practice to make separations as positive as possible, separating isn't always pleasant
- Always respond to a child's distress. Never leave a child to cry. Let the child know you are aware that he or she is unhappy and that you will do your best to help them. What is helpful will vary according to the individual child
- Allow a child who is missing their parent to talk to him or her on the phone during the day if you, the family and the child believe it will be helpful
- Access additional resources and information to support relationships with families and children with additional needs, such as those whose home language is not spoken by anyone at the service
- If a child continues to be distressed over a long period, discuss the situation with colleagues and the family. Work together to try to find solutions that will work in the child's best interests.

Ongoing:

- Encourage parents to stay a short time when bringing their child in. Their presence helps the child to make the transition
- If a parent and child are struggling to say goodbye, help them to separate. Decide together on a ritual or routine for separating and saying goodbye
- Help parents to appreciate the importance of saying goodbye to their child, even if this provokes distress at the time for the child
- Invite parents who are concerned to phone during the day to see how their child is, or take the initiative and phone them to let them know how their child settled

Conclusion

Transitions into and out of care need ongoing attention. Children change, families change and relationships change. The most important contribution to positive transitions is to give priority to building warm, caring, respectful relationships with children and their families ■

References and further reading

- Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Retrieved 23 October, 2009, from: http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx
- Balaban, N. (2006). *Everyday goodbyes*. New York: Teachers College Press
- Greenman, J., Stonehouse, A., & Schweikert, G. (2008). *Prime times: A handbook for excellence in infant and toddler programs* (2nd ed.). Minnesota: Redleaf Press.

Useful websites

- Partnerships for Children: www.rch.org.au/ecconnections/publications/index.cfm?doc_id=11324.
- Raising Children Network: www.raisingchildren.net.au