

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety can be characterized by a child's irrational fear of leaving the safety of parents and home. Children may worry they'll get lost or their parents will get hurt while they are away. Children may lack the confidence to function independently, or they may be afraid of something in the new environment. In some cases, the source of the child's anxiety may be a particular situation at home. The family may be experiencing a change related to a move, illness, divorce, birth of new baby, a death in the family, new babysitter, neighborhood tension, economic problems or an unexpected tragedy. In any event, children with separation anxiety may experience problems sleeping and physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, diarrhea, etc., resulting in a desire to stay home. Parents have to decide whether to keep the child at home or drag the child to school. The early days of each new school year can be rife with scenes of screaming students and distressed parents. In the classroom, the problem can be compounded when one anxious child's crying disrupts the class and may upset other students producing a chain reaction of fear and commotion.

A team approach is essential for implementing a plan to help children with separation anxiety. School personnel and parents want the same thing for the child --a happy, successful school experience. The best approach that can be taken is when parents collaborate with school personnel to create an individualized plan that suit the child's specific fear or area of difficulty. Not every idea will work with every child. Several plans may need to be tried to find the one that works. School personnel may suggest some specific ideas to help children cope with separation anxiety to facilitate the school adjustment. Growing up and learning are good things and parents can promote this understanding through their attitude and actions.

These are examples of general strategies that may help parents dealing with this situation:

- Establish a regular bedtime and morning routine at home. Try to start a couple of weeks before school starts. Be consistent.
- Establish a home-to-school routine from the first few days that determines "this is what you will be doing everyday".
- Be positive and calm when bringing the child to school. Kids are quick to pick up the emotional state of parents. It helps when parents' words of reassurance --that "everything will be fine" -- come from the understanding and belief that this is an experience that is part of your child's growing up.
- Let the child know the procedure that will be followed at dismissal. Be consistent in following up with what you told your child.
- Distract the child while getting ready for school (sing a song, say the alphabet, count to 100, etc.).

- Play a game with the child like “I Spy” as you both walk to class (count the backpacks we see, name all the colors, etc.).
- Minimize the time you spend at the classroom door when leaving your child (greet the teacher, kiss your child, say good-bye and step out).
- When the child is already familiar with the surroundings, consider leaving the child at the front door of the school to walk to the usual student gathering place or to class.
- Talk with the teacher about letting the child to choose a morning classroom job.
- Use a behavior contract or incentive plan with a reward such as stickers that later can be exchange for special activities or privileges.
- Talk to the teacher about letting the child bring a small object or stuffed animal from home for the first few days.
- Tape a family photo inside the child’s backpack or pencil box to provide comfort during the day.
- Remind the child of previous successes at bravery.
- Consider using a carpool or include a friend to accompany the child to school.
- Consult with the doctor about specific physical symptoms that seem to last for too long or are very disruptive to the child’s normal routine.
- Contact the school counselor for additional support.

RESOURCES

Books:

“The Kissing Hand” by Audrey Penn

“The Good-Bye Book” by Judith Viorst

“Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents” by Ronald Rapee

“Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child” by Katharina Manassis.

Websites:

Anxiety Disorder Association of America www.adaa.com

Anxiety Disorders in Children www.keepkidshealthy.com

Freedom from Fear www.freedomfromfear.com

Source: This information is based on and contains excerpts from “I Want My Mommy!” article written by Mary Pat McCartney that appears on *Florida School Counselor, the Official Publication of the Florida School Counselor Association*, August 2008).

