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Separating with a Smile: Parents and Young Children and Separation Issues

Solid separation experiences are special gifts that a parent can give a young child. The unspoken, underlying message should be that a child can function independently and happily away from a parent: "You'll be okay, you'll have a great time. I'll be okay, I'll have a great time." In reality, however, separating can often be difficult for both child and parent. Through various activities, these separation difficulties can be eased and both parent and child can reach the ultimate goal: separating with a smile.

PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES WITH CHILDREN

Preparing for separations beforehand by "playing through" possible concerns helps ease separations for both parent and child. Adults often "talk through" their conflicting feelings. The same relief and resolution that adults find in words, children find in play. To ease separation situations, parents can help young children "play through" separation issues with songs and games, puppets and dramatic play, and books and notes.

Songs/games: Separation songs and games should help a child play out the concept "things disappear, then things reappear, things disappear, then things reappear." This theme is to counter a child's fearful notion that parents disappear and fall into a black hole, never to be seen again.

Some songs to help with separation issues are: "Where is Thumbkin?," "Two Little Blackbirds Sitting on a Hill," "Paw, Paw Patch," and "Open, Shut Them." Games like Hide and Go Seek with people and with a special object can be fun and helpful, too. In Hide and Go Seek, if a child can be both hider and seeker, she gains a feeling of mastery over disappearances.

Puppets/Dramatic Play: Puppets and dramatic play can help ease difficult feelings about separation. Using puppets, Fisher-Price figures, dolls, or toy animals, a parent and child can "act out" the separation scenario, with the child directing much of the action. Rehearsing the anticipated separation situation and allowing a child to express any emotions--fear, anger, relief, joy--provides an important outlet for feelings.

For example, Alex presented two dinosaurs, Daddy and Son, to his young child Bryan and told him that it was time to go to Dinosaur School. Alex's Daddy dinosaur took Bryan's Son dinosaur to school and left. When Alex asked Bryan how the young dinosaur was feeling, Bryan said, "Okay, I guess." Alex then suggested they switch dinosaurs and go to school again. Bryan's Daddy dinosaur left school and Alex had the

Son dinosaur became very angry, crying, kicking, and yelling, "Don't leave. Stay. Come back. I need you." A full-blown dinosaur temper tantrum followed. Bryan was smiling and laughing and loving the scene. Then Daddy dinosaur picked up Son dinosaur at school and took him home and the play ended with a great deal of tension released for Bryan. Alex and

Bryan talked briefly about the school separation and about how Bryan might feel being left at school. While this discussion was additionally helpful, a child's playing without any conversation often will provide all the "dialogue" a child might need.

Dramatic play can be helpful and cathartic to both parent and child. Switching roles can help a parent express possible difficult feelings that a child may be feeling in a separation situation.

Books/Personal Notes: Reading books and creating a personalized separation book are two ways to work through separation issues. Books that can be reassuring for parent and child include: Owl Babies by Martin Waddell, The Good-bye Book by Judith Viorst, A Mother for Choco, by Keiko Kasza, Are You My Mother? by P.D. Eastman, The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown, Home for a Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown, and The Three Little Pigs (Disney version). A personalized book, perhaps called Me and My Parents, with hand-drawn pictures or photographs and personally written text can be a wonderful source for reading before a separation or for a child to hold and refer to while the parents are absent.

As an example, Mary and her young son Kevin mounted four photos onto separate index cards and stapled these into their book: page 1: "Here's a picture of Mom and Kevin smiling together;" page 2: "Here's Kevin looking worried after Mom leaves;" page 3: "Here's Kevin having a fun time playing with his trains;" page 4: "Here's Kevin smiling again with Mom when she returns." Kevin carried this personal book in a fanny pack after Mary left and seemed very comforted at having it nearby.

Helping a child write her feelings in a note can also ease separations. When Aunt Helen was caring for her 5-year-old niece Lila overnight for the first time, Lila became upset at bedtime. Helen began writing a long note to Lila's parents expressing Lila's upset feelings and Lila soon became involved in helping with the note. While Helen wrote the letter, Lila decorated it with flowers to show her Mom and Dad when she saw them the next day. Her feelings on paper, Lila could finally fall asleep, with the note in hand.

SEPARATION FEELINGS AND FEELINGS OF COMPETENCE

Many feelings, often difficult ones, may emerge for both parents and children when separating. Anger, sadness, feelings of abandonment, guilt, fear, and relief can sometimes overwhelm parents and children as they anticipate separating or as they separate. When discussing a separation beforehand or at the time of separation, it is helpful for a parent to acknowledge some of the feelings involved and to help a child verbalize what he seems to be feeling.

In addition, a parent needs to convey the important message that a child is capable of surviving successfully without a parent present. A statement addressing a child's competence during the time away is a real vote of confidence.

For example, Dad might say, "I am going now. You seem sad. I will miss you, too....Mom and I have a wonderful evening planned at the movies. I know you will have a fun time at home. You and the babysitter will do fine. " These words acknowledge feelings of sadness and anticipation of fun and also convey a sense of confidence in a child's ability to function without the parents being present.

"IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT" SKILLS: CONNECTIONS AND CHOICES

At the time of the actual separation, there are two ways to help ease the "letting go" for parent and child: connections--providing very concrete connections in the separation, and choices--providing gentle, but firm limits within which a child has a number of choices.

Connections: When a parent leaves a child, a concrete connection between the parent and child can be very helpful. This connection can take the form of an explanation and/or an object.

Using words, the parent needs to paint a simple, very concrete picture of the parent's whereabouts so that the child can have a clear mental image of where the parent will be.

"I'll be at the grocery store where we always shop. I will be buying oranges and graham crackers and then I will be back soon through the kitchen door."

"Mom and I are going to a restaurant with Aunt Mary and Uncle Ted to eat chicken, rolls, and ice cream. We'll be back home after you're asleep and we'll come in and give you another goodnight kiss."

In addition to a verbal connection, and beyond the transitional "blanket," a physical, sensory concrete connection can be made by having the parents leave a special possession of the parent's with the child. For example, when Jennifer left her 3-year-old daughter Jessica at school, she would take off one of her pierced earrings and pin it onto Jessica's dress, which was very reassuring to Jessica.

Sometimes a small love note or photo from Mom or Dad, that a child can keep tucked in a pocket and pulled out whenever necessary, provides the necessary concrete connection. A polaroid photo of Jon and his mother Diane, safety-pinned, upside-down, to his shirt, eased Jon's separation; Jon could flip the photo up at any time to see his mom and him together.

Choices: The fact that a parent is leaving is a definite limit over which a child has no choice. But, if a child can be given several choices within the separation framework, she has some sense of control and power in the situation and this may ease the separation.

"I need to leave soon. Do you want me to leave in two minutes or three minutes?" is an example. (If a child says, "Never," a parent can respond, "I wish I didn't ever have to leave either. But I do have to go. You can choose two more minutes or three more minutes before I leave, or else I will have to choose.")

"We are going. Should we telephone you in an hour or would you like to call us?" is another example.

Sometimes using a prop, such as a timer, to de-personalize the separation decision can be helpful. Krystal and son Rashid used both an hourglass sand timer and "hug

choices" to ease the transition. "Would you like me to stay for one, or two, flips of the sand timer, Rashid?" Rashid would hold the timer and, when needed, flip it. Then, when the timer was up, "Should we do ten hugs good-bye or eleven hugs, Rashid?" and, after the hugs, Krystal said goodbye. By giving Rashid some choices within the framework of the separation, he felt included in the process of separating and had a feeling of some control over the separation.

REFLECTIONS FOR ADULTS:

Carina had a difficult time leaving her young daughter Hannah at preschool without recalling her own separations from her mother thirty years before in kindergarten--Carina had missed ninety out of 180 school days due to "stomaches." Carina discussed her old kindergarten struggles with her husband, who helped her realize that their daughter's preschool experience was very different from her own painful memories. This discussion made it easier for Carina to separate with Hannah at preschool. Parents often gain insight into their separation feelings by reflecting upon their own childhood separation memories, including starting school, an early hospitalization, or an overnight at Grandma's. This reflection on a parent's childhood can insure that current separations will be based more in today's reality than in the more confusing context of a parent's own past.

In summary, separating from a young child can be difficult for both parent and child. With some preparatory playing and reading, by verbalizing separation feelings and addressing issues of competence, by structuring the actual separation situation with concrete connections and choices, and with some relevant parental reflection, "letting go" can be made easier for both parent and child.

Solid separation experiences are special gifts that a parent can give a child. Hopefully, the ultimate goal can eventually be achieved for both parent and child: "separating with a smile."

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Tips for "Long" Separations

Keeping the Separation Going with a Smile, Keeping the Connection

1. Box of inexpensive goodies wrapped for opening—1 a day; when box is empty, the best present of all arrives—the parent
2. Love notes from parent to child—at least 1 a day; notes written from child to parent—however many; postcards from parent to child (may need to be sent before leaving)
3. Audio tapes of parent talking or singing or reading a book
4. Photographs
5. Personal book—created before by parent with or without the child, created by the child during the separation
6. Life-size craft parent—stuff parent's clothes with newspaper, make a paper-bag face, and put parent

in a favorite place

7. Connections through song—good-bye songs, songs about the missing parent

8. Phone calls, of course, when possible—give child control of when or capability to make the call;

very “concrete” explanations of what parent has been doing, when parent will return; FAXes if possible

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Separation Books for Children

Asch, Frank, Mooncake.

Brown, Margaret Wise, The Runaway Bunny.

-----, Goodnight, Moon.

-----, Home for a Bunny.

Cinderella, Disney version.

S.Collins & S.L. Friedman , All My Feelings at Preschool: Nathan's Day,

Gryphon Press; 1-800-638-0928

Eastman, P.D. Are You My Mother?

Freeman, Dan, Corduroy.

Harper, Wilhelmina, Gunnwolf.

Henkes, Kevin, Biggest Boy.

McCloskey, Robert, Blueberries for Sal.

Penn, Audrey, The Kissing Hand.

Raffi, Baby Beluga.

The Three Little Pigs, Disney Version

Tompert, Ann, Will You Come Back for Me?, Gryphon Press; 1-800-638-0928

Viorst, Judith, The Goodbye Book.

Waddell, Martin, Owl Babies.

Zolotow, Charlotte, I Like to Be Little.

Video/Audio Tape

Baby Songs, (Mommy Always Comes Back), Video Treasures, Heron Communications
(also on audio tape-Crown Educational Toys)

Cinderella—Disney version

Peter Pan

Peter & the Wolf

Three Little Pigs—Disney version

Separation Books and Brochures for Adults

Books to Help Children Cope with Separation and Loss: An Annotated Bibliography,

Joanne Bernstein and Masha Rudman.

Caring: Supporting Children's Growth, by Rita M. Warren, 1977. NAEYC #213.

NAEYC: 202-232-8777, 1-800-424-2460

Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss,

Claudia Jewett Jarratt, The Harvard Common Press, 1994

Mothers and Daughters: Loving and Letting Go, Evelyn Basoff, Ph.D.

Necessary Losses, Judith Viorst, Simon and Schuster, 1986.

Separation, by K. Jervis, 1989. NAEYC #230, \$4.

NAEYC: 202-232-8777, 1-800-424-2460

So Many Goodbyes, Ways to Ease the Transition between Home and Groups for Young

Children, by Janet Brown McCracken, NAEYC #573, NAEYC: 202-232-8777, 1-800-424-2460

Starting School: From Separation to Independence

(A Guide for Early Childhood Teachers), by Nancy Balaban, 1985.

NAEYC: 202-232-8777, 1-800-424-2460

Video List

When Parents Go Away, Mr. Fred Rogers, Heron Communications