

Rocking and Rolling: Difficult Goodbyes Supporting Toddlers Who Are Coping with Separation Anxiety

 Resources / Publications / Young Children / July 2020 / Rocking and Rolling: Difficult Goodbyes Supporting Toddlers Who Are Coping with Separation Anxiety

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LaKrisha, an early childhood caregiver, watches as 20-month-old Nancy and her mother enter the classroom. LaKrisha has been working with Nancy's mother on helping Nancy transition from home to the classroom. Nancy has had such a hard time, sometimes crying for over an hour at drop-off. Her mother must frequently carry her in as she has a tantrum, not wanting to leave her mother's side.

LaKrisha warmly greets both Nancy and her mother and hears Nancy's mother tell Nancy that she loves her and will pick her up after work. Nancy's mother gives Nancy her stuffed bunny, says goodbye, and leaves. Nancy starts to cry loudly, banging on the classroom door. LaKrisha takes a deep breath to calm herself. She knows that Nancy needs to "borrow her calm," because young toddlers don't have the ability to calm themselves just yet. She tells Nancy, "I can see how sad you are that Mommy went to work. You miss her when she isn't with you. But Mommy will be back after work. We have lots of time to play! Do you want to come sit in my lap for a while and rock?" Nancy says yes, but she is still crying. They go to the rocking chair, and LaKrisha holds Nancy. She asks if they can read their special book. Nancy says yes, so LaKrisha reads

Bye-Bye Time/Momento de la despedida, by Elizabeth Verdick and Marieka Heinlen. Soon, other children gather around, listening to the story. Nancy sees her friend Jojo and gets down to sit by her, having now stopped crying. They ask for another favorite story.

Babies and toddlers develop rapidly, continuously building new understandings of the world around them. One way we see this development is in a young child's ability to separate from their caregivers. Starting in the second half of a baby's first year (around 7 to 9 months old), babies begin to grasp the concept of object permanence. This means that a child who could easily be left with someone other than their primary caregiver will often loudly protest when that primary caregiver leaves the room, attempting to bring that primary caregiver back where they can be seen. What developmental experts term *stranger anxiety* will continue, peaking with *separation anxiety* at about 18 months (Zeanah 2019). But this distress doesn't just disappear at 18 months; rather, the difficulty children have with separation diminishes over time as they receive support from caregivers and grow in their ability to hold their loved ones in their minds. It's perfectly normal for a toddler to exhibit anxiety when having to say goodbye to their caregiver. They may cry, become clingier, throw a tantrum, or withdraw in response to being left in the care of others—even people they know well, such as a grandparent, an aunt, or a child care educator. It isn't unusual for this behavior to continue until age 4 (Poole 2005).

With the help of skilled caregivers, young children will begin to develop emotional coping strategies to manage their distress—for example, the cuddling and story time suggested by LaKrisha in the opening vignette. The child's temperament also plays a role in how easily they are able to manage their distress over separations; in addition, trauma and stress can affect how children cope too (Yeary, Zoll, & Reschke 2012).

Young children are supported when their caregivers are able to provide predictability. All the routines and rituals of the day promote a sense of security for little ones: they know what is coming next, and if daily routines follow their predicted pattern, then that also means their primary caregiver's return will follow. For early childhood educators, the challenge is in figuring out how to support a child who is clearly overwhelmed with big emotions when a caregiver departs.

Supporting a child who is dealing with separation anxiety

Young children, just like all of us, need to know others can see and understand what they are feeling, especially when those feelings are overwhelming. Help provide children with words for what they are feeling, and reassure them you are there for support. For example, you can say something like, “I know you are worried that Meemie has left you, but she knows that we will keep you safe, and she loves you!” Help connect children to their peers or to an engaging activity. Some children may need you to remain close for a period of time. If that is the case, find a way to reassure them that you and your colleagues are sources of support. Offer to hold the child, sit with them, share a story, or just allow them to help you with daily tasks. Loving proximity can provide children with a sense of calm and belonging.

When children are especially upset by a separation, they may choose a specific provider as their safe person during the transition. Sometimes this person is not the child’s assigned primary caregiver, and they may feel overwhelmed with meeting the child’s individual needs while also balancing the needs of the group. Whenever possible, though, these relationships should be supported. Providing the child with access to this chosen relationship is not “spoiling” or “giving in” to the child; rather, it is an important way to honor the child’s emotional needs during a distressing time. It is a sign of nurturing care.

It goes without saying that when members of the teaching staff must leave for a break, it is important for them to follow the same separation guidelines as recommended for families (see “The Good Goodbye: Strategies for Families” below). They should let the child know they are leaving and tell them when they will be back.

Working with families to help separation anxiety

Here are some strategies you can use for working with families to support their children in the transition from home to school, as well as in developing coping skills for separation anxiety.

Getting to know the early childhood setting

If a child is new to your class, encourage the family to visit with their child prior to their first day (if possible) so the child can see that the classroom is a safe place and is parent-approved! If age appropriate, show the child where their cubby is and where they will eat, play, and nap. If it's something the family can do, it's helpful to gradually increase the child's time at the center (beginning with shorter periods, such as a visit to the classroom, and transitioning to a full day). This may help the child learn that their caregiver will always return at the end of the day.

Including families in the early education setting

Many early childhood caregivers think it is best not to mention a child's primary caregiver or to have any reminders of the caregiver in the room. But this assumption is actually false—young children do better when they know their loved one is thinking of them as often as they think of their loved one. By purposely avoiding mentioning a child's caregiver, we are feeding into their worst fear—that their loved one has disappeared! Instead, we want to intentionally include children's primary caregivers to strengthen the connection between adult and child. Encourage caregivers to bring photos from home to keep in the classroom. Having a family bulletin board (at child's eye level) is a good way to bring the family into the classroom even when they are away from their child. Teachers might even use these images when they know a child is showing signs of separation anxiety. For example, a teacher could say, "Mindi, I know right now you are missing your Poppa. Poppa is thinking about you right now too. Do you want to go over and look at Poppa's picture?" Consider how technology can support solutions as well. For example, a brief video of a parent singing their child's favorite song or saying "I love you" can be shared with a child if needed.

The Good Goodbye: Strategies for Families

You can support families in having good goodbyes with their children (Jepson, n.d.) by suggesting strategies such as the following:

- Have a routine for leaving home to go to school. For example, you might make up a silly song to sing in the car as you are on your way: "Off we go to Jackie's school, Jackie's school, Jackie's school. Off we go to Jackie's school, early in the morning!"

- Create a goodbye ritual to separate with love. For example, you might say, “Momma loves you more, here are two quick kisses and I’ll give you two more when I pick you up after work.”
- Leave without making a big deal, trusting that the educators know how to support your child’s big emotions.
- Never leave without saying goodbye. Sneaking away only heightens a child’s worry that they cannot trust you or trust in your return.

Partnering with families

It is hard to leave a child who is crying. Many family members feel sad, guilty, or upset doing so. You may see these feelings manifest in family members through behaviors like hovering, prolonging the goodbye, questioning if something happened at school to scare their child, or even breaking down in tears themselves! A critical part of your role is helping families understand separation anxiety as a normal part of development. Creating a partnership and working together to support a child’s ability to have a good goodbye is the first step in supporting a young child who is experiencing separation anxiety.

Provide a way for families to check in with you every day, noting anything that may be different in that day’s schedule. If you cannot personally greet each parent or family member at the door, dedicate a place for them to leave you any useful notes about their child. Did the child sleep normally the night before? Did they eat well before school? Is there anything going on at home that may cause changes in behavior, such as a caregiver having to leave on a trip or change their work hours? This information helps a lot as you try to see things from the child’s perspective!

You can also work with caregivers to find out what works best for them to soothe their child. Is there a song, a transitional object, or a phrase they use at home that you could also use to calm the child? You can help a child feel that they are in their caregiver’s thoughts by using similar strategies: “I know you miss your momma. Your momma told me she sings you this song when you are sad. Let’s sing it now.”

Transitional objects, such as a special blanket or a small stuffed animal, can be very helpful for little ones as they learn to hold their caregivers in their minds. Encourage children’s primary caregivers to use transitional objects to help children when they

cannot be physically with them. Be sure to let caregivers know what items meet the guidelines for the classroom.

It is also beneficial to help families understand that following routines at home is just as important as following routines at school. For instance, some children who are allowed to stay up later during the weekend find separation from their caregivers to be overwhelming in the first few days back at school, usually because they are overtired. When they finally get back into the rhythm of drop-off, it's the weekend again. Encourage families to maintain the same routine even on weekends so their child isn't overtired come Monday morning.

How you are is as important as what you do

Jeree Pawl, a developmental psychologist, has stressed how important it is for children to witness adult emotional regulation in order to learn how to deal with their own big emotions (Pawl & St. John 1998). When a child is *dysregulated* (distressed/overwhelmed), the first step for adults is to check their own emotional regulation. Children in your care can only be as calm as you are feeling! They are “borrowing” your sense of calm to find their own, just as LaKrisha mentions in the opening vignette. If you need to, pause and breathe before responding to a child who is dysregulated. Your efforts will be much more effective.

While separation anxiety is a part of normal development, you can foster healthy social and emotional growth by helping families experience good goodbyes every day at drop-off. Through consistently using these practices, young children in your care will learn that they are safe, cared for, and free to explore their world.

For even more mindfulness tips, visit zerotothree.org/mindfulness.

Think about it

- How do you find your calm when children in your care are dysregulated? Do you breathe? Do you pause before responding?
- How can you create a space for children in your care to connect with their loved ones? How can you include families in everyday activities?

- How do you help the parents and primary caregivers of the children in your care plan for a good goodbye?
- How do you support caregivers in their growing knowledge of child development and healthy social and emotional development?

Try it

- When a child is displaying their distress over a parent or caregiver's departure, help provide words for what they may be feeling: *sad, upset, worried, mad, frustrated, unsure*. Consider if the child needs extra nurturing—to be held, to be rocked in a chair, or to stay close by your side.
- Connect children to their loved ones by using pictures, stories, transitional objects, or songs.
- Remember to find your calm before trying to calm a young child.

Rocking & Rolling is written by infant and toddler specialists and contributed by ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization working to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers by translating research and knowledge into a range of practical tools and resources for use by the adults who influence the lives of young children. The column can be found [here](#).

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