

FAP Parent Tips

November 2008

Easing a Child's Separation Anxiety



Separation is a normal stage of your child's development. You won't be able to head off every leg-cling or tearful goodbye, but you can help prepare your child for absences and do things to strengthen confidence and security about your return.

Strategies to help babies and toddlers just learning to separate from primary caregivers include:

Have babysitters come before the child develops stranger anxiety. If you leave your baby with a sitter for short periods when they respond well to any caring person, they'll become accustomed to being with different people.

Schedule separations after naps or feedings. Babies are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they're tired or hungry.

Have a consistent primary caregiver. If you hire a caregiver, try to keep him or her on the job from the

baby's infancy into toddlerhood.

Practice separation for brief periods and short distances, increasing as the child can tolerate. Praise the child for managing well. If your baby initiates separation by going into another (baby-proofed) room, wait a few minutes before going after him; this will enhance his sense of independence.

Keep the child in familiar surroundings when possible. For example, rather than dropping your child off at your sister's house for the evening, have your sister come to your house.

Make new surroundings familiar. Let your child become comfortable with new surroundings with you present. The first time you leave a child with a relative, for example, shouldn't be the first time you and the child have visited that relative's house. Allow your child to bring a favorite object of hers or yours.

Develop a "goodbye" ritual. Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a special kiss.

Have a calm, positive attitude. Babies and toddlers are sensitive to your moods and will pick up any tension in your voice, face, touch, or gestures. And don't give in to the child's tears, which are a ploy to get you to stay. If you keep running back when your baby fusses at being without you, that just reinforces the anxious behavior.

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FAP Parent Tips is a publication of the MWR FAP Office. For questions regarding the information in this newsletter, contact Shari Hutchinson, FAP Manager, by phone or email to shari.hutchinson_ctr@dla.mil.

Tell your child when you go that you are leaving and that you will return...then go. Don't stall or repeat goodbyes; that will just make your child more anxious and clingy. Tell the child where you're going and when you'll be back in terms he can understand. Conversely, don't sneak away without saying good-bye; that will undermine the child's sense that she can rely on you.

When your child is a little older, other things you can do to promote trust and a sense of security about separation include:

Listen to your child's feelings. Let your child know that you understand his feelings and reassure him that you'll return. A statement such as, "I know you're feeling sad. I'll miss you too," is more helpful than telling a child that he's making a fuss over nothing.

Read stories, role-play, and remind your child of successes. A number of children's books incorporate the theme of separation anxiety such as *The Kissing*

Hand by Audrey Penn, *Big Truck and Little Truck* by Jan Carr, and *I Love You All Day Long* by Francesca Rusackas. Talk with your child about times when she was brave or did something independently.

Honor all commitments to your child, especially time commitments. Be especially attentive to picking up a child at the specified time or returning home when stated. Additionally, look for other ways to make and honor commitments, even small ones, to build trust and security.

Plan and talk about enjoyable activities in advance. Help your child prepare to be away and anticipate positive outcomes. Let your child know how you can be reached if necessary.

It's important to know that separation anxiety in children is considered routine and a healthy part of development. It becomes a diagnosable disorder when the anxiety and fear become excessive or beyond what is expected for the child's age.

The Family Advocacy Program (FAP) at DSCC is a DOD program dedicated to domestic violence prevention, spousal and child abuse prevention, education, prompt reporting, investigation, intervention and treatment. The program at DSCC provides a variety of services to DSCC, DFAS, tenant organizations, active duty and reserve military and their families to enhance their relationship and parenting skills and improve their quality of life. This mission is accomplished through a variety of groups, seminars, workshops, brief counseling and intervention services to include spousal and child abuse awareness, positive parenting, domestic violence, elder care, depression, grief/loss, couples communication skills, stress management, anger management, healthy communication, sexual assault awareness, and deployment assistance for military and civilians.

Because everyone faces problems and challenges in their lives, the FAP is dedicated to helping the DSCC community with those challenges. While these problems are usually resolved without assistance, they are sometimes too big or too complex to solve without help. Finding the right kind of help for complex situations is not an easy matter. Finding specialized, qualified counseling, how much it will cost, what to expect from counseling, and how to determine if the counselor is a good match for the client are typical concerns when seeking help.

If you are an active duty or retired service member or family member, the FAP Manager can help answer these questions, as well as provide free of charge consultation and referral service. If you are a civilian DOD employee, the program manager can answer your questions and refer you to the civilian Employee Assistance Program.

All services provided by the Family Advocacy Program on DSCC are free and confidential.