

For many young children attending Child Care for the first time is an exciting, nerve-wracking, scary and very important time. It is also often a stressful time for parents, children and caregivers. Some children have little or no experience of leaving Mum or their primary caregiver, or of being in a group care environment. There is lots to learn, lots to experience and lots of fun to be had if it all goes well.

For some children, however, it does not go well and they experience prolonged and significant distress. The emotional impact of starting Child Care cannot be underestimated. It is important to refresh our memory about the role of attachment in the child's development and the cause of separation anxiety. We need to remember what is developmentally appropriate for children. This will help determine the best ways to offer quality care to children having difficulty adjusting to the care environment.

WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT?

Attachment is a process that begins at the child's birth. The mother is usually the first and primary attachment that the child makes – although this primary attachment may be to the father or other 'parent-figure'. There are a wide range of behaviours that contribute to and are involved in fostering attachment. Through these mutually responsive behaviours of touching, fondling, eye contact and feeding, children and adults form a special and close relationship. This relationship ensures that someone provides for both the emotional and physical needs of the child.

As children grow and develop they develop confidence that their needs will be met. This is the beginning of their sense of trust and security in the world. They learn to separate from the significant people in their lives and begin to explore their world. They start to gain an awareness of themselves as a separate person and their concept of self starts to gradually emerge.

They use their mother – or the attachment relationship – as the secure base for which to explore and to which they can return when and if the need for comfort arises. As infants learn that comfort and reassurance will be provided when needed, they become increasingly independent and more able to be adventurous. Separation is a normal and natural process for children, however, it needs to be safe for both the baby to go and for the parent to let go.

Piaget describes conceptual development starting when infants learning that people, objects and 'things' have an independent existence. They later develop an understanding of person and object permanence. That means that they gradually understand that people and objects continue to exist, even when they are out of sight. This concept begins to emerge around four months of age and becomes well established at about seven to eight months. However, children may be distressed up to two to three years of age because they often do not understand that separations are only temporary and that people will return.

Separation anxiety, the stress and fear induced on being parted from the attachment relationship, begins to emerge around six to seven months of age, peaks around eleven to twelve months of age and may persist for two to three years. Shortly after the onset of separation anxiety, infants begin to exhibit a fear of strangers. Infants seek to stay close to their mother (or other adult) and learn to alter their behaviour to maintain this proximity. For example, babies crawl quickly after their mother if she leaves the room and cry loudly if she takes no notice. If a child enters Child Care at the 'peak period' for separation anxiety – around 1 year of age – then this beginning can be very difficult. If possible, it is better if commencement can be before or after this developmental stage. Enforced separation does not foster independence nor does it solve the problems associated with separation anxiety such as clinginess, fussiness or excess crying.

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WHAT CAN WE DO?

It is very important that children develop a secondary attachment relationship with a caregiver. The child can then explore and participate in the programme by using this caregiver as 'home base'. This provides a safe environment from which to further develop skills and increase social competence. This is also consistent with Q17AS Principles 1, 5 and 7.

Attachment is essential to development and must be promoted in quality programmes. At the same time, carers need to recognise that parents may feel threatened by their child developing relationships with the caregiver. It may comfort parents to understand that these relationships are secondary and complementary to their own. They may feel better if they understand that separation anxiety and all the feelings that go with it are a sign that the child's attachment to the parent is strong and vital. Children will learn to cope with separation and this skill will last throughout their lifetime. The coping skills that they develop indicate that they are establishing trust in others and becoming more self reliant.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

We can best help parents and children learn to separate and re-unite by helping them learn to say 'Hello and Goodbye'. Dombro, Colker and Dodge (1997) have a fabulous chapter on this topic that should be essential reading for all caregivers. The following is a summary of their ideas which incorporate most of the tried and true strategies.

How can I support children and their families when it comes time to say hello and goodbye?

- ☉ Spend time with each child and his/her family before they begin Child Care.
- ☉ Hang up a welcome sign at the beginning of the year with names (and photos) of children and family members.
- ☉ Plan a meeting at the beginning of the year in which you talk about hellos and goodbyes with families.
- ☉ Encourage parents to leave their child for gradually increasing amounts of time. Greet families each morning. Say goodbye each afternoon.

- ☉ Pay attention to and participate in rituals children and their families develop.
- ☉ Hang pictures or label the child's 'place', hook, space etc.
- ☉ Set out an interesting object or activity every morning.
- ☉ Keep in touch with parents about how things are going.

How can I help children feel connected to their families throughout the day?

- ☉ Encourage families to bring a 'special' item or object from home.
- ☉ Include pictures of children and their families in your environment.
- ☉ Place 'phones' near family picture.
- ☉ Talk about children's parents throughout the day.
- ☉ Make daily routines an important part of the day.
- ☉ Have parents tape record a favourite song or story.
- ☉ Photograph family members in your setting.

How can I help children gain some sense of control over hellos and goodbyes?

- ☉ Create an environment in which children can feel competent throughout the day.
- ☉ Offer activities that allow children to express feelings about hellos and goodbyes.
- ☉ Encourage games and play that help children gain a sense of mastery over separating and reuniting.
- ☉ Read books about comings and goings, Child Care, daily routines.
- ☉ Believe in the child's competence.

SOME MORE SUGGESTIONS

- ☉ Have a Centre Policy about arrivals and departures that supports parents, children and staff.
- ☉ Be prepared for wails, protests, sadness from the children.
- ☉ Ensure that the parent says 'goodbye' before

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leaving. (It is generally best if the parent leaves promptly after saying goodbye).

- ⊙ Act – don't react. Be prepared and know how you want to handle difficult or awkward 'goodbyes'. You need to be calm, competent and in charge so that the parent and child can be too.
- ⊙ Recognise that parents often experience negative feelings such as guilt and sadness when leaving the child.
- ⊙ Allow the child to express his/her feelings about separation – be empathic and follow your own instincts.
- ⊙ State the situation clearly and simply, e.g. 'Mums gone now. You're sad, but she will come back at the end of the day'.
- ⊙ Show respect for the child and his/her feelings, e.g. 'Would a cuddle help?' 'Would you like to sit here with me until you're ready to play?'
- ⊙ Calmness or chaos affects the mood of the child. Check your room and the physical environment. What do parents and children see when they walk in?
- ⊙ Develop a relationship with the child and build trust through familiar, predictable and repetitive routines. Routines provides security and stability for the child.
- ⊙ Be physically available for the child.
- ⊙ Use other children as nurturers/care mates.
- ⊙ Establish a centre-based 'comforter'.
- ⊙ Use role play, puppets to talk about comings and goings, sad feelings.
- ⊙ Use your programme to explore activities designed to increase the child's independence, security and self concept.
- ⊙ Ensure that your behaviour is culturally appropriate.
- ⊙ Caring and nurturing touch is vitally important. Be kind, caring and use a warm tone of voice.
- ⊙ Use technology – telephones, tape and video recorders depending on your resources.
- ⊙ Notice improvements and gains. Praise and reward yourself.
- ⊙ Take care of yourself and support each other.

Specific activities for older children (3+ years) are

described in Patty Claycombs '**Bear Hugs for Saying Goodbye**' (1994). One of these activities is described below:

Giant Hugs and Kisses

Use this Bear Hug at the beginning of the year when most of your children are having difficulty separating and are missing their parents.

Materials:

Butcher paper, tape, crayons

Preparation:

Hang a long piece of butcher paper on a wall at your children's eye level. Draw a large X and O in the centre of the paper.

Activity:

Explain to your children that the X on the paper stands for a giant kiss and the O stands for a giant hug. Tell them that whenever they miss their mums and dads they can come up to the paper and draw their own X's and O's on it. Leave the paper up throughout the day so the children can add to it as needed.

Variation:

Let your children's parents add their own X's and O's on it. Leave the paper up throughout the day so the children can add to it as needed.

Variation:

Let your children's parents add their own X's and O's before leaving the classroom.

RECOMMENDED READING

Blecher-Sass, H. (1997). **Goodbyes Can Build Trust**. *Young Children*. 52(7): 12-14.

Claycomb, P. (1994) **Bear Hugs for Saying Goodbye**. Washington USA: Warren Publishing House, Inc.

Dombro, A. Colker, L and Dodge, D. (1997). **The Creative Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers**. Washington USA: Teaching Strategies Inc.

Flesher, K. (1996). **A is for Attachment**. *RUCSN Newsletter*. Winter 1996: 6.

Gonzalez-Mena, K & Eyer, D.W. (1993) **Infants**,

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Toddlers and Caregivers. (3rd Ed). California, USA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Hope, M (1992) **For Crying Out Loud! Understanding and Helping Crying Babies.**

NSW: Randwick.

Jervis, K. (Ed) (1984). **Separation: Strategies for Helping Two to Four year Olds.** Washington DC: NAEYC.

Raikes, H. (1996). **A Secure Base for Babies: Applying Attachment Concepts to the Infant Care Setting.** *Young Children.* 51 (5): 59-67.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS ABOUT SEPARATION AND CHILD CARE

Let parents know that there are many books that they can read with their children about starting Child Care, making friends, and what mothers and fathers do during the day. Other relevant topics are stories that deal with sad feelings and that enable exploration of object permanence. Use them yourself. Many are available through local libraries as well as specialist children's bookshops. The following list is by no means exhaustive!

Berger, Terry (1974) **A Friend Can Help** Chicago USA: Advanced Learning Concepts Childrens Press

Brand, J & Gladstone, N. (1985) **My Day Care Book** Acropolis Books Inc

Brown, M. B. (1968) **Benjy's Blanket** Franklin Watts Inc

Brown, M.B. (1947) **Goodnight Moon** New York: Harper and Row

Cooney, N.E. (1981) **The Blanket That Had to Go** Putnam Publishing Group

Eastman, P. (1962) **Are You My Mother?** London: Harper and Row

Gleeson, L. (1993) **Mum Goes to Work** Gosford NSW: Ashton Scholastic Pty Ltd*

Hill, Eric. (1983) **Where's Spot?** Harmondsworth

UK: Puffin Books*

Hill, Eric. (1987) **Spot goes to School** Harmondsworth UK: Puffin Books*

Hutchins, Pat. (1975) **Goodnight Owl!** Harmondsworth Books UK: Penguin Books*

Pragoff, Fiona. (1985) **I go to nursery school** London: Methuen Children's books*

Richard, Lisa (1997) **My kindy: an essential introduction to Child Care and Pre-School** Balmain NSW: Lineup Pty Ltd*

Rogers, Fred. 1985. **Going to Day Care** New York: GP Putnam

Ziefert, Harriet (1988) **Mommy, where are you?** Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books*

Ziefert, Harriet (1989) **Don't Cry Baby Sam** London: Picture Lions

WHO TO CONTACT FOR HELP

Should you require additional assistance, please contact your Regional ISA Team.

If the child or family concerned speaks a language other than English, you may also wish to contact the PSCWA (08) 92494333

For further information and advice, contact CHILD Australia.

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