No more tears: How to create a positive attitude to drop-offs

"I'll see you later!" "I promise I'll be back!" "You'll have a great day!" "Everything will be okay!"

You might have said these things at the nursery, childcare or school drop-off while your little one clung to you tightly, begging you not to leave them. They may have tearfully asked you to stay, tugging at your legs and your emotional heartstrings as you tried to go. Let's face it, goodbyes can be tough, both on our kids and us.

Some level of separation anxiety is developmentally normal for children during their early learning years of education and care. It often starts when children are around six to 12 months old, peaks when they are around 18 months and generally starts to ease off when they are between four and five years[1]. It can happen when young children start nursery, care or school for the first time, change centre or school, or move up a level. Kids can even go through phases and may be happy to be dropped off one day, then find it harder the next.

Managing separation from parents or carers is a skill that children learn over time – and they need your support. It's important for them to feel secure and safe in the moment, which is a step towards developing independence, trust and self-confidence.

You know your child best and what helps them with goodbyes. For inspiration, here are some additional ideas you could try to help them cope and settle well without you.

Maintain a positive attitude

When you demonstrate a positive attitude and support them with their feelings, it can ease your child's fears[2]. Before you go in the morning you could start by talking about some of the exciting things they might do that day. Remind them of the positive people they will see, like their educators, teachers and friends.

If it's a new centre or school, chat about what activities they might do and can look forward to, such as painting or playing sport. You could even create a 'my first day' sign with their favourite things on it, their teacher and age, to build excitement about going. When you get there, set them up at an activity and spend some time with them, or connect them with their educator to welcome them. Make sure to say a quick goodbye before you go, so they know you are leaving and to help prevent them from feeling unsettled or confused[3].

Five practical tips to ease children into their day

1. **Be ready to go:** Reduce stress and rushing by making sure their bag is packed, uniform or clothes are ready, and lunch is organised if it isn't provided. Involve your child in preparing these things if they are old enough.
2. **Share stories:** There are great books about being away from family and going to care or school that you could read together, try checking out your library or online for ideas on this topic. You could also share your own experiences of school or care so they can learn from you.

3. **Practice and prepare:** If they are starting somewhere new, do practice runs to get them used to the environment, or show them photos so they know what to expect. Point things out that they might like: "Look, they have swings!"
4. **Play a game:** Role play the morning routine with their favourite toys. Let them pretend to be the teacher – kids love to take charge! Try to keep role plays brief if they are getting the hang of it, so it doesn't become a chore.
5. **Make mornings fun and calm:** Keep mornings as calm and consistent as possible. Try creating a picture schedule of what they need to do to get ready. You could also have music playlist for home or the trip there, let them pick their favourites and have a dance or sing along!

Have a special goodbye ritual

Research suggests another way to help make drop-offs easier is to use a 'goodbye ritual', which involves doing the same thing each time you leave.[3] Kids thrive on routines and these can help them feel safe and secure when you go. A goodbye ritual can be as simple or detailed as you like, the main thing is to keep doing it.

Examples of goodbye rituals:

- A simple high-five, hug, kiss, or sharing a funny handshake
- Singing a song you both love, or changing the lyrics to be about them, like Twinkle Twinkle Little Star but replacing 'star' with the child's name
- Saying the same message or words each time you go, such as: "See you later, alligator!"
- Putting a sticker, stamp, or a drawing on the back of their hand so they can look at it and think of you during the day – like a heart or smiley face.

Whatever you choose, it is best to commit and stick to the goodbye ritual. Try to keep it brief and not stay too long, maybe 5-10 minutes. If they are very upset, you can comfort them, but it helps to try to leave shortly when the goodbye is over. You don't need to just drop and go. In fact, it is best if you don't sneak out without saying goodbye, to avoid children feeling overlooked and to help reassure them[3]. If you share drop-offs, make sure everyone else does the ritual, too, like other parents and carers or grandparents.

Encourage independence: Spend time apart to ease separation anxiety

Some children find it challenging when their parents or carers simply go into the next room without them, so leaving them for care or school may feel like a huge deal. This can be quite typical, particularly for young children and babies[1].

You can help by spending short periods of time away from them to help build up their coping skills. This doesn't necessarily mean paying for a babysitter or organising a playdate without you. You can start small by spending a little time apart in other areas of the house, or getting them to do things without your help, to make a difference to their confidence.

For babies or toddlers, this could mean simply walking into another room for a couple of minutes and then showing that you came back (if they are very young, it is best if they are supervised by someone else while you do this). If they are older, try asking them to take something to the laundry for you, or to get the napkins from a café counter. Give them lots of attention and praise for their efforts, for example: "You've done this all by your own, that's great! You can be so proud of yourself!" As they spend more time away from you, even in the small moments, children can become more confident in handling separation for longer periods[3].

Comfort and communicate to ease a child's fears

It is okay to comfort your child when they are upset and to allow them to have these feelings. Reassure them that their feelings are common and let them know you care. One of the most important things you can say is that you will be back, as deep down that is likely what they are worried about.

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If they are old enough, ask them to talk to you about why they are so upset to be left, to help them process their emotions and handle difficult situations. Reassure them at drop-off and suggest something that might help cheer them up, like playing with a friend or doing something they enjoy. Praise them if they face their fears to do this. For older children six years and up, using the coping activities in Fear-Less Triple P Online can help.

Parents and carers can feel a range of emotions themselves. It is understandable to be worried about your child after an emotional drop-off. Open communication with your school or centre can make you all feel better. Talk with them about how to support your child and work together with them as a team to make things as smooth as possible. For younger children, they might suggest bringing in transitional objects like a toy or favourite blanket from home. They may also help comfort your child in the morning by taking them to go play. If you do have a hard drop-off, you could ask your centre or school if you can call later to check-in on your child. You will likely find they say, "They were fine!" right after you left.

To be able to separate from you, it is important that your child knows they can rely on you to come back. Make sure you always stick to what you tell your child and be honest and clear. Before drop-off, let them know who is going to pick them up and when (for younger kids you could say "after lunch" rather than "at 2pm"). If someone else is picking them up, be sure to tell your child when and where you will see them.

When to seek help for separation anxiety

Some children can have a more shy or nervous temperament than others and may need extra support to separate from you[4]. Try not to compare your child to their peers, or even their siblings, as every child is different, and some degree of anxiousness can be natural.

Remember that kids can also change and there may be times when leaving them at childcare or school is difficult. They could go through easy drop-off periods and then back to times of it being trickier, plus some degree of back-to-school blues can be common at the start of the year.

However, there are signs to look out for to help you consider if your child is more anxious than others. You know them best. If you think it is more serious and becoming an ongoing concern, seek help from your doctor or healthcare provider for support for you and your child.[1]

It is important to take care of yourself as well. It can be distressing to see your child upset and to leave them when they aren't handling it well. Reaching out for support can be a sign of strength, be this talking to other families to share experiences, or speaking to a healthcare professional.

1 Feriante, J., Torrico, T. J., & Bernstein, B. (2024). Separation Anxiety Disorder. In *StatPearls*. StatPearls Publishing LLC. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32809628/

2 Gouze, K. R., Hopkins, J., Lavigne, J. V., & Bryant, F. B. (2022). A multi-level longitudinal model of risk factors for generalized and separation anxiety symptoms in a community sample of 6-year-olds. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 53(3), 405-417. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-021-01132-7

3 Klein, P., Kraft, R., & Shohet, C. (2010). Behaviour patterns in daily mother-child separations: Possible opportunities for stress reduction. *Early child development and care*, 180, 387-396. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430801943290

4 Sandstrom, A., Uher, R., & Pavlova, B. (2020). Prospective association between childhood behavioral inhibition and anxiety: A meta-analysis. *Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology*, 48(1), 57-66. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-019-00588-5