



School's here...and so is Separation Anxiety: 8 Tips for Parents of Reluctant Kids

How did your kids go at the beginning of the new school year? If you do kinder or school drop-off you will have noticed some kids take the new challenge in their stride, whereas others have a much harder time with the transition and separation from their parents.

Maybe you found yourself with a little one who was crying and clinging and begging you not to leave. I feel for you if this was the case – it's so hard! Or maybe your child complained of tummy-aches or headaches before leaving home. This is a common symptom of anxiety.

It's fairly common for some kids to have troubles adjusting to school. Although there is no magic solution when supporting your child through separation anxiety, here are some ideas for you:

Find a friend

It helps immensely when kids have a friend at school. Ask the teacher who your child seems to play with the most and introduce yourself to the parent at either drop off or pick up. Arrange a play date over at your house or a park to help nurture that relationship.

Talk about it ahead of time

If you know that tomorrow is likely to be another morning of tears and clingy behaviour then talk about it today when you are both feeling calm and relaxed. When children fear something, they need the opportunity to express and feel their feelings. Some of their worries or concerns may seem small or insignificant to us, but for them they are very real and should be believed and respected. It is important to acknowledge that the feeling of worry is very real for your child. After you've validated their feelings, then gently move to problem solving. Remind them of the fun parts of the day like playing with a friend or lunchtime (if this is fun for them). Remind them that after a little bit of upset they were able to enjoy the school day and they got to do new and exciting things.

Let them know that you will ALWAYS come back at the end of the day to pick them up (or make sure they know the plan if there is after-school care).

Team up with the teacher

Work in partnership with the teacher. Experienced teachers have been through this before so are likely to have a few good ideas. If the separation anxiety doesn't ease after a few days the teacher may be able to give your child a special job to do immediately upon getting to school. This will serve as a transition activity and is something for him to look forward to. Get to school early so the teacher can personally greet your child and take him to the activity.

Don't focus on the separation

On the way to school talk about the first thing your child will do once they get in the classroom. It shifts the focus from the separation to the enjoyable activity. This helps them mentally prepare before they are physically at school. They start to visualise the inside of the classroom and can start to get used to the idea of being there. Something like this: *"When you go to the reading corner, what book are you going to read first?"* or *"Which colouring in page will you choose when you get there – the train or the castle?"*. Or if you have an arrangement with the teacher (see previous tip) you can talk about this with enthusiasm.

Don't talk about 'school'

At home in the morning, don't talk about 'school' too much. Talk about 'reading time' and 'drawing' and 'play time'. Talk about that first activity that he will be doing with the teacher (if you have one planned). The word 'school' may currently have a negative, anxiety provoking association for your child so minimise using that word might help if this is the case. Instead talk about the activities they will be doing at school that you know they enjoy. This makes the idea of school more concrete and less abstract.

Transitional objects

A special note from you kept in their pocket, or matching love hearts drawn on their hand your hand can help your child feel connected to you during time apart.

Underlying issues

Sometimes separation anxiety occurs in the context of more [generalised anxiety](#) or trauma. Maybe there is a real problem at school that is causing distress. Listen carefully to your child and do a little detective work if you sense there is more to the story. Could it be that they don't know how to ask to go to the toilet? Or they are being bullied? Do they find it hard navigating the school grounds at recess? Listen carefully and get more information from the teacher to help you work out what the underlying problem may be.

When to seek professional support

Often patience and using the above tips can ease separation anxiety. However, there are times when it is necessary to reach out for additional support. You may need further help if:

- The anxiety interferes with your child's life and subsequently your life
- There are frequent complaints of stomachaches or headaches
- The severity of the anxiety is inappropriate for your child's developmental level
- The symptoms haven't settled after about four weeks.
- Your child has an excessive fear of leaving the house

A child psychologist can teach you how to help your child with coping strategies and work with you to alleviate the anxiety. Sometimes one or two parent consultations are enough to learn strategies to address your child's separation anxiety. Other times the psychologist may suggest working individually with your child as well as with you.

Finally

Remember, your child isn't trying to manipulate you in order to stay home. The feelings are real for your child and quite distressing. Although you may not always be able to prevent the separation anxiety, you can always empathise with your child and connect with them with cuddles and snuggles at the end of the day.

You wouldn't be the first parent to cry on your way to work after holding it together at school drop-off. This experience is so very stressful for parents. Look after yourself to help manage your own stress. Sleep (if you're at a stage of parenting where that's possible!) and eat well and talk to a trusted friend who will listen and support you. Taking care of yourself and allowing yourself your own emotional release will help keep you centred and more emotionally available for your child.

For more support in helping manage your child's separation anxiety, please contact the clinic to book in with one of our friendly psychologists

www.hopscotchandharmony.com.au

For parenting support to help your child's anxiety and emotional regulation consider our online, self-paced parent program

<https://www.hopscotchandharmony.com.au/ccparentingprogram.html>