



Therapy Changes

*Focused guidance when you need it most*

THERAPY CHANGES GUIDE

# Making Goodbyes Easier:

A Parent's Guide to Managing Separation Anxiety



# Making Goodbyes Easier:

Tearful, tantrum-filled goodbyes are common during a child's earliest years. Around the child's first birthday, separation anxiety can develop when a parent leaves for the first time. Although separation anxiety is a perfectly normal part of childhood development, it can be unsettling for parents and caregivers. Understanding your child's reactions and knowing a few coping strategies can help you and your child get through this difficult transitional time.

## Step 1: Understanding Your Child's Reaction

Babies adapt well to being cared for by adults other than their parents. Then, around the age of 4-7 months, babies develop object permanence, or the knowledge that people or things exist even when they are out of site. Thus, when a parent leaves, the child worries that mommy or daddy won't come back. From 8 months to one year, babies begin to crawl and start to develop a sense of independence. With this newfound independence, he or she might become even more uncertain about being separated from a parent. Some children might continue to experience this uncertainty, especially as they begin walking and talking, which typically occurs around 18 months to 2 ½ years of age.

Stresses such as significant life change that results in a disruption to a child's routine can trigger separation anxiety later in a child's life. Probably one of the most significant transitions that occur in early childhood is a change in care situation, commonly attending preschool or kindergarten. Other changes can include a new sibling, moving to a new place, or tensions at home. The experience of separation anxiety lasts a variable amount of time, depending on the child and how a parent responds. In some cases, it can last through elementary school years, although typically it lasts only a few months.

During the early childhood stage of development, parents or caregivers are likely to experience a variety of intense, hard-to-understand emotions. On one hand, it can be gratifying to know that your child is as attached to you as you are to him or her. On the other hand, feelings of guilt can arise when you take time out for yourself and the amount of attention your child seems to require from you can seem overwhelming at times.





## Step 2: Positive Parenting Strategies

The following acronym, GRAPES will allow you to stay focused on what your child needs most:

- \* **Goodbye Ritual:** Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss. Other options include giving your child the option of bring a familiar object with them when they leave the house or hold an object from mommy or daddy when they are away
- \* **Routine:** Keep familiar surroundings when possible and make new surroundings familiar. Help your child feel more comfortable by predicting change and talking about transitions before they happen
- \* **Acknowledge Feelings:** Try being a “mirror with heart” to your child by reflecting what you think they might be feeling. Try saying: “I know you feel sad and scared...”
- \* **Practice Separation:** Leave your child with a caregiver for brief periods and short distances at first. Try scheduling separations after naps or meals, as children are more susceptible to anxiety when they are tired or hungry. You can ease your child’s separation anxiety by staying patient and consistent, and by gently but firmly setting limits.
- \* **Enjoy Your Child’s Accomplishments:** Praise your child’s efforts – even the smallest of ones such as going to bed without a fuss or a good report from school. Offer positive reinforcement such as stickers, high five’s or a special “date night” with mommy or daddy.
- \* **Swift Goodbyes:** Tell your child that you are leaving and that you will return and then go – don’t stall. Keep calm during separation. If your child sees that you can stay cool, he or she is more likely to be calm, too. Reassure your child that he or she will be just fine – setting limits will help the adjustment to separation.

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## Step 3: When You Need Additional Help

Childhood, by nature is marked by certain fears – of monsters, of the dark, or being left with a new babysitter, of starting school, and so on. In early childhood, crying, tantrums or clinginess are healthy reactions to these fears. Separation Anxiety Disorder, however, is a more serious condition that requires additional support. Separation Anxiety Disorder in children is the most common anxiety disorder and is marked by extreme difficulty when away from home or loved ones. The disorder is marked by intense fear that the child's parents or caregivers will be harmed when they are away from the home. Children with Separation Anxiety Disorder also experience nightmares and can become extremely agitated even by the thought of separation. Although children may eventually outgrow Separation Anxiety Disorder, they have a greater risk of developing an anxiety disorder as teenagers and adults.

Play Therapy differs from regular play because the therapist actively translates the child's play into words. By being actively engaged in the child's play, the therapist models appropriate problem solving techniques and ask the child leading questions to help him or her discover new, creative solutions. In Play Therapy the therapist follows the child's lead. By doing this, the child is encouraged to make decisions and develop a sense of control over the play session; and their concerns.

Therapy provided by professional therapists who specialize in children's issues can be helpful to assist children in developing skills to overcome their fears and support families in learning positive parenting approaches to ease their child's distress. Play Therapy is a therapeutic approach utilized by many child specialists who work with children too young to express themselves with words and who experience Separation Anxiety Disorder. Play Therapy gives children the chance to express what is troubling them and learn to cope with their emotions and find creative solutions to their problems.



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*Please contact Therapy Changes if you would like more information about how to help your child overcome separation anxiety disorder through play therapy.*

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