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An all too typical scene on the first day of a new caregiving situation is a frightened child in tears, clinging to a parent’s leg. Parents often feel embarrassed or confused about what to do next. They may feel a mix of strong emotions: either sympathetic and angry toward the child for this protest, guilty for leaving the child, or perhaps questioning what they have “done wrong” since everyone else’s child is adjusting so easily!

Separation is a developmental challenge. When adults take care of younger children, they are investing in the child’s future. Responding to “I want my mommy!” can help children cope with separation successfully both now and in the future. Responding to “I want my mommy!” is only the beginning.

### Different Ages, Different Needs

Some behaviors are common to certain ages. Recognizing them can help you understand what is happening and why.

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<th>AGE</th>
<th>DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE</th>
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<td>Birth to 8 Months</td>
<td>Although infants recognize voice, face, smell, and caregiving style, as long as their needs are being met they can easily be comforted by another caregiver.</td>
<td>A new caregiver may not immediately be able to read a baby’s unique cues for attention, diaper changes, and hunger. The caregiver can observe the baby with the parent to learn as much as possible about how he or she communicates.</td>
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<td>8 Months to 2 Years</td>
<td>During this stage of development it is normal that separation anxiety begins, and children may become frightened and upset when their parent leaves.</td>
<td>Reminding children that mommy or daddy always comes back can help ease fears. Transitional objects such as a special blanket or soft, snuggly toy can also ease anxiety.</td>
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<td>Preschoolers usually handle separation fairly well, but life stresses like a new sibling, problems in the family, or a new caregiver can trigger separation anxiety.</td>
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- **To build trust**, always tell your child the truth — that you are leaving but you will be back. Don’t disappear without notice. Sneaking out does not build trust! Say: “Mommy is going to work and I will come back to get you after your nap” (or whatever time, based on an activity in the child’s schedule).
- **Stay calm** and show confidence in your child, but get help if needed. Ask your child, “Can you say goodbye to me by yourself, or do you need (caregiver) to help you?”
- **Develop a special goodbye ritual** that you and your child share at every separation. It should be short, pleasant, and loving. Be consistent.
- **Always talk** to your child about the happy experiences to expect in the new situation. Help your child look forward to a favorable activity or person.
- **Keep a brief schedule** of your child’s activities or discuss your child’s day with the caregiver as time permits. Use that information to reinforce the good times as you talk to your child. One of the least fruitful indications that something is wrong with the caregiver (caregiver) to help you?”
- **Familiar photograph** extends the security of home to the unfamiliar setting. A “blankie” is a tactile comfort that smells, feels, and looks like home.
- **Maintaining a positive relationship** between parent and caregiver makes separating easier.

**TIPS TO EASE SEPARATIONS**

- **Prepare your child for a new separation.** Prior to the first day, make a short visit and include a tour of the room where the bathrooms are, and where he will nap.
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- **When your child’s first day arrives, be prepared for your own separation anxiety.** Once you have said goodbye, leave. Prolonging your goodbye only makes things harder. If you are concerned about your child during the day, call your caregiver. Most parents discover that all is well shortly after their departure.
- **Help your child choose a part of home to bring to child care if she wants.** Often a blanket, snuggly toy, or familiar photograph extends the security of home to the unfamiliar setting. A “blankie” is a tactile comfort that smells, feels, and looks like home.
- **Watch for your child’s individual expressions of anxiety — swelling of the lips, thumb sucking, or other behavior changes.** Patience and understanding from parents and caregivers will help your child cope with his feelings.
- **Be prepared for separation anxiety to appear after a seemingly painless initial adjustment.** (Many teachers call this response “Second Week-itis.”) Your child is now comfortable enough to show her true feelings. Don’t mistake this apparent delayed reaction with indications that something is wrong with the caregiver and withdraw the child needlessly.

### American Academy of Pediatrics
- **Becoming the Parent You Want to Be**
  - Laura Davis & Jana Keyser
- **Caring for Your Baby and Young Child**
  - Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Clement Hurd
- **The Kissing Hand**
  - Audrey Penn, illustrated by Ruth E. Harper & Nancy M. Leak
- **The Runaway Bunny**
  - Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Clement Hurd
- **My First Day at Nursery School**
  - Becky Edwards, illustrated by Anthony Flinton
- **To Learn More**
  - Andrea Finn, illustrated by Ruth E. Harper & Nancy M. Leak
  - My First Day at Nursery School
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  - Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Clement Hurd
  - Becoming the Parent You Want to Be
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**Books for Children**

**Books for Adults**
Separation is a developmental challenge. When adults take children's feelings seriously, talk to them honestly, and give them lots of understanding support, children can learn ways to cope with separation successfully both now and in the future. Responding to "I want my mommy!" is only the beginning.

DIFFERENT AGES, DIFFERENT NEEDS

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- Prepare your child for a new separation. Prior to the first day, make a short visit and include a tour of the facility. Show your child where his belongings will go, where the bathrooms are, and where he will nap.

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Becoming the Parent You Want to Be

Laura Davis & Janis Keyser

American Academy of Pediatrics/Steven P. Shelov, M.D., M.S., F.A.A.P.

To Learn More

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