

TRANSITIONING

YOUR CHILD INTO THE NURSERY

The first strike: babyhood

Separation anxiety typically first hits around 8 months, when babies suddenly grasp that their parents exist apart from them. Literally, it's like, boom! They understand you can leave. They don't, however, understand that you're coming back. This anxiety may last several weeks, or even a few months, until your child realizes that you're not, in fact, abandoning them for life—you're just going to the bathroom.

How to get through it:

Start early

By 6 months, introduce your baby to other regular caregivers, such as relatives or a babysitter. Your child needs practice being away from you, hopefully well before preschool. You want someone else to hold and talk to your kid a little differently. These experiences may minimize their anxiety later on when you're not around.

Keep your goodbye short

A quick "Bye, James, see you this afternoon!" is ideal. Prolonging the departure gives your child the idea that there's something to be afraid of. But here's the really tough part: Try not to let the sobbing lure you back. Reappearing after you've left only gives your child incentive to cry harder and longer next time.

Match your body language to your words

Your child can sense your confidence as you walk out the door. Flash a smile, give a cheerful wave. You'll probably be faking it, but they won't know that yet. They will just know that you feel good about who they are with—and they can, too.

Avoid sneaking off

Parents often dash out the door when the child isn't looking, hoping—understandably!—that this will preempt a meltdown. But that's tricking your child, and it can break your child's trust in you. Instead, first ask your caregiver to redirect your child's attention right after you leave with a favorite toy, a game of peekaboo or some new music (whatever), then say your quick goodbye.

The peak: toddlerhood

For some kids, separation anxiety vanishes before toddlerhood; for others, that's when it starts, peaking sometime between 12 and 24 months and bringing a more potent dose of distress. This is when children develop a strong sense of attachment to the parent. You'll see tantrums or screaming or hysterical crying. What's also at play now is their desire to have some control over their lives. They know by now that you're coming back, but they would prefer that you stick around. Moreover, because they also know that wailing will usually get a reaction, they give it their best shot.

How to get through it:

Develop a goodbye ritual

For example, whenever you have to leave your toddler at daycare, give her two kisses and a high five. The ritual creates order around the departure for both parent and child. And that provides security.

Give your child a small job

When Ilene's 23-month-old son, Luca, hit a particularly clingy phase, she started asking him to "shut the door for Mommy" when she left for work. This little responsibility made the transition a lot easier. "He likes to help, and he gets to have control of the door." This strategy can also work with kids who get anxious when you have to leave the room. For instance, if you need to get the laundry, give your child a sweater to "fold" until you get back.

Provide an ETA

A child this age doesn't understand 'three hours,' but you can say, 'I'll be back after snack time.' And do your best to return when promised. It's tempting to think they won't know the difference if you're significantly late, but at some point they will—and you can't predict when. If you're heading out for a late night, tell them you'll see them in the morning.

Remind your toddler that you always return

When Anna's twin boys were 2, she put her own twist on this trick: "When they'd say, 'Mommy, don't go,' she'd ask, 'What does Mommy do when she leaves?' and they'd say, 'Mommy comes back.'"