



A Guide for
Parents

Starting Kindy & Managing Separation Anxiety

Starting Kindy can be an adventure for some children, while for others it can be daunting and overwhelming.

Children who are more sensitive by nature can struggle considerably with separating from their parent (or other trusted adult); a phenomenon known as separation anxiety.

Although separation anxiety is a very normal experience, it can make the transition to Kindy stressful for the whole family. This guide explains the biological reason behind separation anxiety and what it can look like in children.

It also provides strategies to help your child, and explains why some common advice is potentially harmful.

Many of the strategies provided in this guide will work best with the support of the teacher and school.

Information for schools and teachers is available via the *Starting Kindy and Helping Families Manage Separation Anxiety: A Guide for Schools and Teachers* information sheet, and the *Starting Kindy and Responding to Separation Anxiety: The Problem with Conventional Advice* information sheet.



WHY DO CHILDREN EXPERIENCE SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separating from a parent (or other trusted adult) is distressing for young children because it goes against a child's most basic survival instincts.

Children's brains are evolved from hunter-gatherer times, when our way of living offered little protection from the environment. Back then, a child left alone would have quickly succumbed to predators or other threats, so it was critical for them to stay close to a trusted adult for protection. Children who did this instinctively were more likely to survive and pass on their genes to the next generation.

Today, although our way of living has changed, our brains have not. Children are still driven by these same basic survival instincts. So, when a child is faced with separation, *they can feel as if they are in real danger*. When this happens, the child's nervous system responds as if they are under threat by flooding the brain and body with stress hormones (such as cortisol and adrenaline). This prepares the body to either fight the threat or run away (known as fight or flight). However, because children have no ability to fight back or fend for themselves, their instinctive response is to run to the relative safety of the parent.

This is why the need to stay close is intensified in moments of uncertainty or stress; and is why we see the very familiar meltdowns at school drop-offs, whereby children cry and cling in despair, doing everything they can to prevent the separation and stay safe (known as pursuit behaviours). *It is important to remember, this behaviour is out of the child's control. The child is acting purely on instinct.*

The Problem with Conventional Advice at Morning Drop-off



It is common for parents to be advised that the best way to handle separation anxiety at morning drop-off is to 'keep goodbyes quick and make a swift exit'. However, while this 'rip the Band-Aid off approach' might be convenient for parents and teachers, *it poses some significant risks to the child.*

By forcing a child to separate too quickly, we run the risk of pushing their distress levels too high, whereby they are utterly overwhelmed with fear. With no ability to escape the situation, the only option left is to escape in their mind through an involuntary response known as dissociation.

Dissociation can be understood as a dreamlike state, whereby the child's state of awareness is altered, their senses are dulled, and they become mentally 'checked out' of reality as a means of self-protection. In this state, the child is operating from the 'survival' centre of their brain, meaning the 'thinking' part of their brain (the part needed for learning) is 'off-line'.

This makes learning and social interactions difficult as the child will struggle to take in information from the surrounding environment. In short, *dissociation is the opposite to the kind of relaxed and alert mental state that is needed to support learning and making friends.*

One of the important things to understand about dissociation is that *children in this state often appear calm and compliant.* This can lead the adults around them to believe that the child has settled and is no longer in distress. As a result, parents are often advised that their child quickly settled and was 'fine' soon after they left; however, this advice is based solely on the child's outward behaviour and overlooks what is happening for the child internally.

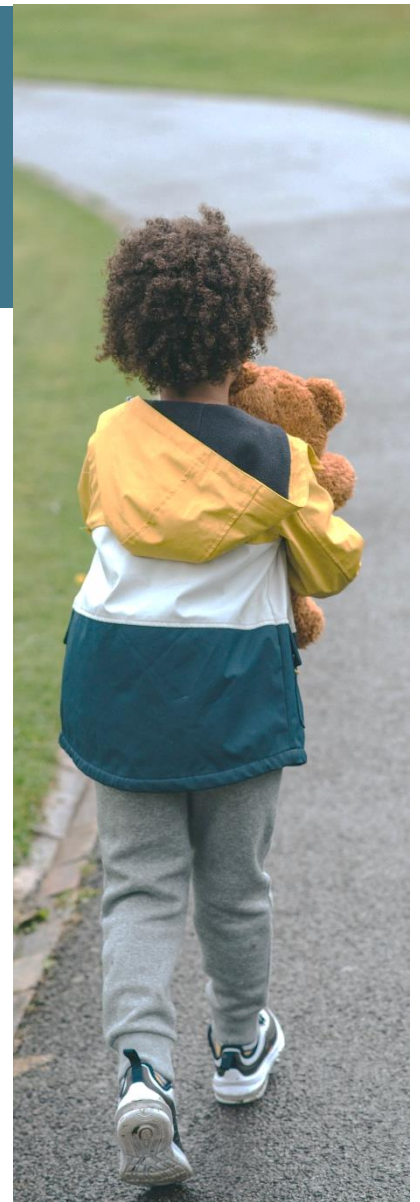
While not every child who suffers separation anxiety will dissociate once the parent leaves, neurobiological studies show that levels of stress hormones can remain high long after a difficult separation. This is problematic as repeated or prolonged exposure to either state does not support healthy brain development and can lead to problems with both mental and physical health.

What can you do to help your Child with Separation Anxiety

Making a child feel safe and secure is essential to reducing separation anxiety. This is achieved by helping the child build a strong relationship with the teacher and building familiarity with the environment. For most children a 'good enough' relationship (whereby the child feels connected to and sufficiently safe with their teacher) can be developed within 2-8 weeks. However, for some children, it will take longer.

Following are a range of strategies that are based on an understanding of why children struggle with separation anxiety. Parents should trust their intuition and follow their child's lead. It is fine to stop using any strategy that your child does not respond well to. Children who really struggle (or are not adjusting as hoped) may benefit from a more graduated introduction to Kindy, whereby time spent in the classroom is gradually increased over a number of days or weeks.

Advice on how to do this is available via the *Structuring a Graduated Introduction to Kindy: A Guide for Parents* information sheet; however, it is best to engage with the school psychologist or another preferred child psychologist for tailored advice.



1

Familiarise your child with the Kindy environment before Kindy starts

Parents can take early steps towards building a sense of safety and security by familiarising their child with the teacher and the school environment as much as possible in the weeks before school starts. Be sure to talk with your child about school, their teacher, and classroom, and ask the school to provide you with up-to-date photos of each to facilitate the discussion.

For example, you might say something like “that looks like a painting station where you can create some lovely paintings” or “your teacher, Mrs Jackson, is wearing a green top, that’s your favourite colour”. You can also take the opportunity to attend an orientation day and/or visit the school grounds. Visiting the school and meeting the teacher without the stress of separation will help your child start to build a sense of safety.

2

Use a security object

Security objects (such as a soft toy or blanket that your child is attached to) are an important part of a child's emotional support system. By providing a sense of familiarity and comfort, they can support your child through the period of separation. It is advisable to talk with the teacher and ask that your child has easy access the object whenever they wish. It is also a good idea to keep duplicates both at home and at school.

Children who don't have a security object could use another item for comfort (such as a small photo of you together). This can help your child feel connected to you throughout the day. For more ideas download the *Starting Kindy: Tips to Help Children Cope with Separation* tip sheet.

3

Talk about the day and focus on the reunion

Parents can help children prepare for each day by going through the sequence of events (in not too much detail), making sure to end the story with "and then I'll pick you up". For example, tell them they have art class with Miss Baker after recess and then rest time after lunch (ask the school for an up-to-date copy of the timetable). The important thing here is to make sure the day is predictable and to emphasise the reunion.

4

Foster positive regard between child and teacher

In psychology it is understood that we tend to like people who like us and who are the same as us. Parents can use this to build a positive relationship between child and teacher. For example, say to little Harriet "Mrs Holmes seemed very happy to see you this morning, I think she likes having you in her class", or you might tell Mrs Holmes how Harriet seems to be taking a shine to her (yes, it works both ways). You can also highlight any common interests between teacher and child, such as their love of cats or their favourite foods.

5

Plan to problem solve

It is important that parents tell their child what to do if they have a problem at school. For example, say to your child “if you need help with anything, just ask Mrs Bolton (or find the nearest teacher) and she will help you”. This will help your child understand that help is still available even when you are not there.

6

Spend time settling your child each day

All children are different. Some will run into class on their first day, whereas others will need more time to settle into their new environment. Many will benefit from having you spend extra time at drop-off to help them feel safe. For some children, this might take just a few minutes but, for others, you might need to stay well into class time. Either way, the goal is to integrate your child into the classroom environment. Try to get them settled into an activity, or help them engage with the teacher or a friend.

If you are spending long periods in the classroom, it is a good idea to try to build-in short separations once your child is ready. This might start off as leaving your child’s side to get a tissue, and gradually increasing to things like going to the toilet or moving the car. Stay within the limits of what your child can tolerate and always tell your child that you will be right back (and go back!). For more information on how to do this, download the *Managing a Graduated Introduction to Kindy: A Guide for Parents* information sheet.

7

Engage with the Teacher and School

It is not uncommon for some schools and teachers to actively discourage parents from spending extra time in the classroom. This can be difficult for parents as it can add stress to what is already a stressful situation. If this happens, you will likely need to advocate for your child. It might help to have a conversation with the school and teacher about what your child needs in order to have a fair chance at thriving in the classroom.

Just as some children need certain learning interventions, others need more scaffolding in order to feel safe so that they can get on with the business of learning. Providing your school with information on the neurobiology of dissociation and distress might help. This is covered in the *Starting Kindy and Responding to Separation Anxiety: The Problem with Conventional Advice* information sheet.

8

Managing in the COVID climate

COVID has previously restricted movement within the school and in the classroom, limiting parents' ability to stay with their children in the mornings and slowly transition to the school setting. In these kinds of circumstances, parents can ask schools and teachers to adapt class plans where possible to allow parents to be present with their children for longer. This might include starting the school day with outdoor activities (like a story or an investigation, for example). This provides an opportunity to start the day with a more gentle transition from parent to teacher.

9

Recognise that your child might need extra support from you at other times

If your child is finding it hard to be away from you for the school day, they will likely need more time and connection with you at other times. Parents should be prepared for the possibility of extra night wakings or increased clingy behaviour after starting Kindy. Try to be sensitive to this and schedule more one-on-one time with your child where you can.

In Summary

The above are just some of the strategies that can help make the transition to Kindy easier for your child. It is important to follow your child's lead and find which strategies help best. Remember, the most effective way to reduce separation anxiety is through building a relationship with the teacher - a child's most basic need is to feel securely held in the care of a trusted adult with whom they share a connection. So anything you can do to facilitate this process will help with the transition.

Some children will form a 'good enough' relationship relatively easily, whereas others (who are more sensitive in temperament) will need more time. These children will benefit greatly from more scaffolding from you, the parent, in order to become happy and healthy learners.