



A Guide for
Schools &
Teachers

Starting Kindy

&

Helping Families Manage 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 parents (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 family concerned and can place added pressure upon teachers who find themselves in a supporting role.

This guide covers the biological reason behind separation anxiety and what it can look like in children, and explains why some common advice is potentially harmful. It also provides strategies on how to support families while managing professional boundaries and self-care.

Many of the strategies provided in this guide will work best if they are implemented in collaboration with parents.

It is important to have ongoing communication with parents and devise a plan that supports their parenting values as much as possible.



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 children with Separation Anxiety

Helping children feel safe and secure (meeting basic safety needs) is essential to reducing separation anxiety. This is achieved by helping the child build a strong relationship with their teacher (and assistant) and becoming familiar with the Kindy environment.

For most children a 'good enough' relationship (whereby the child feels connected to and sufficiently safe with their teacher) can be developed within two to eight weeks. However, for some children, this will take longer.

Following are a range of strategies that schools and teachers can implement to support families, which are based on an understanding of why children struggle with separation anxiety. *Teachers should encourage parents to trust their intuition and follow their child's lead.* It is fine to stop using any strategy that the child does not respond well to.

For children who really struggle (or are not adjusting as hoped), it may be appropriate to offer families a more gradual introduction to the Kindy environment, 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 the family's preferred child psychologist for a more tailored approach.



What Schools Can Do

What Schools can do

1

Familiarise children with the Kindy environment before Kindy starts

Schools should encourage parents to familiarise their children with their teacher and school environment as much as possible in the weeks before school starts. Schools can facilitate this by supplying families with up-to-date photos of the teacher (and assistant), the classroom, and the school grounds to facilitate discussions at home.

Resources can be sent home or made available online. Online resources can include a brief welcome video, whereby Kindy teachers introduce the classroom and themselves (including some personal information such as hobbies or favourite foods).

The goal is for the teacher to give children a sense of who they are and begin to lay the early foundations of a solid child-teacher relationship.

What Schools can do

2

Facilitate contact between families before Kindy starts

Schools are encouraged to advise families of their child's assigned class and teacher as early as possible so that families have ample time to familiarise their child as per above.

This should include classmates' names and can also include families' contact information to be shared among the group (with relevant consent). This allows parents the opportunity to arrange play-dates and begin to build relationships with classmates.

This is important as a sense of safety can also be established in relationships with peers, which can help scaffold children while the child-teacher relationship is still being established. It can also help scaffold children on days when their usual teacher is absent.



Hosting a day for children and parents to visit the classroom and meet their teacher is a great first introduction to the Kindy environment. This allows children to familiarise themselves with both place and person, without the stress of separation, which will help begin to establish a sense of safety for the child.

Orientation days will be most effective if they:

- are held close to the start of term (within a week or two)
- are held with the relevant teacher (and assistant) present
- include a combination of free play and a simple activity (such as story time on the mat) to give some idea of what the first day will be like
- are held in the relevant classroom (which should be configured in the same way as it will be once terms starts)

Consistency of place and person are key ingredients to helping children feel safe and secure. Changes to teachers (such as relief teachers, specialist teachers, and varying duty teachers) will all challenge this, as will changes to the environment (such as external classes and excursions). As such, it is advisable for schools to keep such changes to a minimum, particularly within the first few weeks of term.

The following is recommended.

- Delay excursions until late in the term.
- Provide ample notice for excursions so that parents are able to make arrangements to accompany their child if needed.
- Have the education assistant accompany children to external classes.
- Notify parents of changes, such as relief teachers, in advance wherever possible so they can prepare their child.
- Keep duty rosters small. Ideally, lunch and recess duty will be split between the teacher and education assistant so that children have at least one safe adult with them at all times. If this is not possible, duty teachers should at least be limited to a small number of teachers *that the children have a good deal of contact with. Rotations of large numbers of teachers that children have no relationship with does not meet the safety needs of the child.*

What Teachers Can Do

What Teachers can do

1

Make the day predictable

Encourage parents to talk with their child each morning about the program for the day (in not too much detail). It is a good idea to provide families with a copy of the timetable, and ensure that any information provided on how the day will run is accurate and up-to-date.

The point is to make the day predictable for the child.

What Teachers can do

2

Welcome parents who wish to extend their stay at drop-off

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. Some parents will prefer to spend more time in the mornings helping their child settle. *It is common for schools to actively discourage this, however, this is not advisable* as it can add stress to what is already a stressful situation.

A child's nervous system is like a tuning fork that will 'pick up' on the parent's internal state. This means they will 'catch' their parent's feelings for better or worse. *Parents who feel forced out of the classroom are likely to feel conflicted about this and will unconsciously pass their anxieties onto their child; thereby exacerbating the child's anxiety.*

Conversely, parents who feel supported and welcomed into the classroom are more likely to bring a calm presence to the situation, which will help co-regulate the child.

Welcoming parents will also help build a positive parent-teacher relationship, which will have a positive impact on the teacher-child relationship. Children take their cues on who to trust from their parents, meaning that parents' positive feelings toward you will help communicate to the child that they are being left with a safe adult.

What Teachers can do

3

Offer guidance to parents who stay into class time

Parents who elect to stay into class time may need guidance on how to use the time to integrate their child into the classroom environment.

Advise parents to encourage their child to engage in an activity or with peers wherever possible, and assist them to do so by inviting the child to join activities or help with tasks (bidding for connection).

It is important to do this gently and avoid pressuring the child – a useful technique is sports casting, whereby either you (or the parent) simply sit with the child and commentate on what is happening in their surroundings (e.g., “look at how tall Jenny’s tower is, how many more blocks do you think will fit before it falls?”).

The idea is to appeal to the child’s natural instinct for curiosity and play without overtly pressuring them to join in.

What Teachers can do

4

Make a plan with parents who stay

Most children who struggle with separation anxiety will start to settle into the Kindy environment within the first few weeks of term; however, some children will continue to struggle for much longer.

Parents who elect to stay to support their child should be made aware of the potentially lengthy commitment and advised to be as consistent as possible in their approach.

If there are days when parents cannot stay, advise them to forewarn their child and yourself and make a plan. If parents are spending long periods in the classroom, advise them to try to build-in short separations *once the child is ready*. This might look like leaving the child’s side to get a tissue in the early phases, but can gradually increase to things like going to the toilet or moving the car.

Parents should be advised to be guided by their child and stay within the limits of what they can tolerate. For more information on how to do this, download the *Managing a Graduated Introduction to Kindy: A Guide for Parents* information sheet.

What Teachers can do

5

Managing in the COVID climate

COVID has previously prevented parents from entering the classroom, limiting their ability to support their child's transition into the classroom each day.

It is possible that these circumstances will arise again in the future. If this happens, teachers can adapt class plans by starting the school day with outdoor activities (like a story or an investigation). This provides parents an opportunity to stay with their children for longer, which allows for more gentle transition from parent to teacher if needed.

What Teachers can do

6

Be clear about what support you can offer and when

Most parents will be unable to stay after drop-off and may instead prefer to hand their child directly to you (or your assistant) if they are struggling with separation. This can be overwhelming, especially when you have multiple distressed children to manage at once.

It is a good idea to structure your mornings in a way that will help you manage this; for example, allocate 15 minutes before class starts for you and your assistant to manage direct handovers. Communicate your availability to parents at the beginning of term, making it clear as to when you are able to provide extra support.

What Teachers can do

7

Have some clear and simple language prepared

When children are upset, it is common for adults to try and reason with them to calm them down. This is ineffective as *the child's 'thinking' brain is off-line in these moments, making them literally incapable of logic or rational thought.*

As such, it is important to keep language simple in these moments and avoid lengthy explanations.

Have some short and simple phrases ready to name feelings and emphasize the parent's return, and encourage parents to use the same language (e.g., "I know you're sad when mummy leaves, but she'll be back later to pick you up"). Naming feelings releases neurotransmitters that calm the emotional brain down.

Remember to pay attention to your non-verbal cues (such as tone of voice and body language) as this is what children will respond to best.

What Teachers can do

8

Support the use of security object

Security objects (such as a soft toy or blanket *that the child is attached to*) are not just something to cuddle, they are an important part of a child's emotional support system. Psychologists call these transitional objects because they support the transition from dependence to independence.

By providing a sense of familiarity and comfort (through touch and smell), they can support children through periods of separation from parents. *It is important that access to these objects is not restricted as this will heighten stress.* Children are more likely to need them during transitions, in novel situations, and during other times of stress.

Be sure to ask parents to provide duplicates to be kept at school. Children who don't have a security object could use another item for comfort, such as a small photo of them and their parent (download the *Starting Kindy: Tips to Help Children Cope with Separation* tip sheet).

While this will not be as helpful as a security object, it can help children feel connected to parents throughout the day.

What Teachers can do

9

Set aside banking time

The most effective way to reduce separation anxiety is to build a quality relationship between teacher (and/or assistant) and child. Children have an innate need to feel held in the care of an adult whom they trust and feel connected to.

Teachers can facilitate this process through a technique called banking time, which involves spending one-on-one time with the child 2-3 times a week for approximately 10 minutes.

These sessions must be child-led and *should not involve teaching* (as teaching potentially requires many corrections, which does not facilitate relationship building). The goal is simply to foster a positive relationship with the child through conveying interest, sensitivity, and understanding.

In Summary

The above outlines just some strategies that schools and teachers can use to support families through the transition to Kindy. It is important to remember that *the most effective way to reduce separation anxiety is through building relationships. A child's most basic need is to feel securely held in the care of a trusted adult with whom they share a connection; thus, the most important relationship is that between the teacher and child.*

However, establishing a stable relationship with the environment and with peers will also help establish a sense of safety for the child. So anything that can be done to facilitate this process will help with the transition.

Some children will form a 'good enough' relationship relatively quickly, whereas others (who are more sensitive in temperament) will need more time. It is important that these children are afforded this time in order to become happy and healthy learners.

