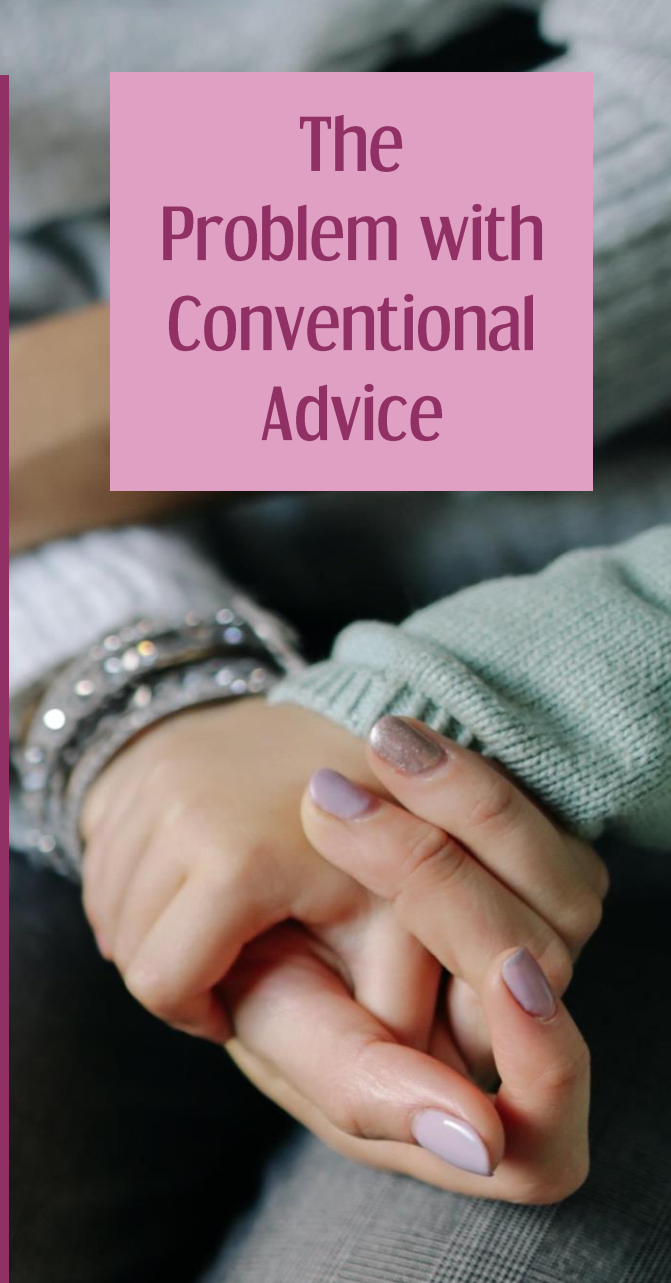


Starting Kindy & Responding to Separation Anxiety

The
Problem with
Conventional
Advice



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.

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 is the second part to the body’s ‘fight or flight’ response, and is commonly referred to as ‘freeze and fawn’. This is an involuntary response whereby the individual’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 short, it is a way of partially shutting down awareness so that the mind is protected from being fully present during times of unbearable distress. This survival mechanism is why people often do not remember details of a bad accident or other traumatic experience, for example.

Becoming dissociated is clearly problematic as it threatens the overall wellbeing of the child; it also obstructs effective learning. Children who are dissociated (or in any highly aroused state) are 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 and process information from the surrounding environment effectively.

In short, dissociation is the opposite to the kind of relaxed and alert mental state that is needed to support learning and forming friendships. This places the child at a disadvantage in relation to peers in all aspects of learning.

One of the key things to understand about dissociation is that children in this state often appear calm and compliant (fawn). This is often misinterpreted by adults as evidence of the child being 'settled' and no longer in distress, and is why parents are often advised that their child quickly settled and was 'fine' soon after they left. However, this advice is based on faulty assumptions about the child's overt behaviour, and overlooks the child's internal state.

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.

In Summary

The above explains why forcing a quick separation is potentially problematic and not always in the best interests of the child. Children who are more sensitive in nature (and are thus more likely to experience separation anxiety) are at higher risk of experiencing dissociation after a difficult separation.

Therefore, a better approach is to support a gentle transition into the Kindy environment that welcomes parents into the classroom alongside their child as needed. This allows children time to transition into their new environment and to build a trusting relationship with their new teacher (and assistant) while being scaffolded by their parent (or other support person). Once a good enough relationship is established, then separating from the parent becomes less threatening for the child.

For some children this will happen quite quickly but, for others, it will take more time and effort. Either way, taking the time to build this relationship is key to dealing with separation anxiety in a safe and supportive manner that respects the biological needs of the child.