

SEPARATIONS

Why is parting such sweet sorrow?

Separation experiences happen all through our lives beginning with birth. Separations occur when we change jobs, move to a new home, take a trip, graduate from high school or college, get married, get divorced or lose a loved one through death. In all of these experiences, you must give up something familiar and face the unknown. Facing the unknown stirs up our emotions and brings them to the surface.

"The first time I left you I felt like I was abandoning you. I also felt very sad and I missed you so much. When I left I was worried for you, but I was so relieved when I came back."

~ Susan, age 16
Katy, eight months

The excitement and adventure along with the pull back to the familiar produces the pain felt in separations. These experiences cause you to feel a variety of emotions: lonely, guilty, helpless, angry and a real fear of loss. These emotions are rooted in the parent-child attachment that was formed in the early months of life. This bond matures and strengthens as your child grows. Attachment and separation both involve intense feelings of love. Understanding these feelings will give you insight into why "parting is such sweet sorrow."

"The way I felt when I first left my baby with someone I was kind of worried because I wondered if the people were going to take care of my baby the way I would or close to it. Were they going to monitor my baby good. But when I leave my baby, he is usually asleep. When I pick him back up, he seems like he is glad to see me."

~ Terri, age 17
Samuel, two months



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

Reunions can also be a time when intense emotions come to the surface. After a time of separation, you look forward to a happy, loving reunion. It doesn't always happen. While you are away, your child is saving all his passion for you, his favorite person. So when he sees you come to him, these feelings may come out in a total breakdown of behavior. Your child may turn away, cry, fuss or throw a temper tantrum. Some caregivers may even say, "He never does that for me." It is out of his love for you and the security he feels with you that he saves his strong protests for you.

As your child develops, he will react to separations differently.

UP TO ABOUT SIX MONTHS

He gradually begins to be aware of himself as a unique person, and aware of others as separate from himself. He will respond differently to other adults than he does to you; however, he does not mind being held by a variety of adults.

SIX - NINE MONTHS

Your baby may go through a very healthy but troublesome stage called "stranger anxiety." He may now protest when someone new wants to hold him. The absence of a parent is experienced by the baby as a loss. He may fear that when his Mom or Dad go away, they may never come back! Resist the temptation to "sneak" out the door without saying goodbye. You might stay and introduce him to the caregiver, indicating that you like the "stranger."

12 - 24 MONTHS

This is a busy stage. Your child may be so busy with his "job" of playing that your departure will not cause a protest.

TWO YEARS - THREE YEARS

This can be a very clinging age when your child really needs and wants you. Try not to fuel her fears by acting upset. Being firm but loving and trying to involve her with the caregiver or another child is the key to getting out the door.

PRESCHOOLERS

Children at this age can be enormously independent and eager to please, yet they can also be whiny and difficult. This is the bossy age, when your child wants to tell everybody else what to do. Separation on some days may be a cinch, while on others it may be impossible to get away.

SCHOOL AGERS

Dr. Brazelton discusses the separation of the school years.

"Each year, the first few days of school will be difficult. The rigid routines and the expectations of school close in on the child. Each new school year is a rite of passage, a reminder to a child that she is growing up and must become independent. The hardest thing about these days is likely to be leaving home and the old routines. If she has younger siblings at home, she'll wonder, What will they be doing while I'm gone? Will my parents miss me? Leaving home can be a thrilling step into the world, but it brings a sense of loss. This sense of loss is bittersweet, carrying with it all the warm security of home that the child is giving up as she makes each step into the world."

~ Dr. T. Berry Brazelton,
Touchpoints

HOW CAN WE HELP OUR CHILDREN SAY GOODBYE TO US?

A thoughtful parent can prepare her child to say goodbye. Some of these tricks may help:

Tell your child as much as possible about her new experience in advance. Describe the place she'll be going. Tell her about the people she'll be with. Talk about the activities she'll do there. Paint a positive picture of the experience to come.

Read to her about the exciting new experience ahead. The public librarians can help you find just the right book for her!

Acknowledge her fears. Tell her that everyone feels scared sometimes (even adults!) and that it's okay to feel that way. Assure her that she will feel better soon.

Allow her to "regress" a little. You might help her with her clothes in the morning, and don't pressure her with meals for a while. Learning to separate from you is a big job and will take most of her energy for a while.

Allow her to take a favorite toy with her. It's like bringing a little piece of home along. It will remind her of her security at home.

Let her take one of your possessions with her. If she has your gloves, she knows she'll be with you soon again! Your photo may get her through some rough times.

Resist the temptation to "sneak out" to avoid saying goodbye. It makes children feel abandoned.

You know the feelings of sadness are temporary, and that a reunion will come soon. Your child hasn't had as many experiences yet. He may be feeling that this sadness is permanent – it will never end! His resistance to leaving you is not naughtiness, but rather a desperate attempt to keep his beloved person near him. He will come back to you a little more confident each time, built up by the success you have encouraged in him. He is growing into the brave, capable child you want him to be!