
Dealing With Anxiety & Separation



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BY RHONDA

“Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know....” I’m sure you’re familiar with the rest of that saying. Life may be surprising enough as it is, but what about that babe in arms morphing into someone you hadn’t quite anticipated?

The most adventurous of parents may have a cautious child, that introverted mum may have birthed someone quite the opposite, and that couple trying their best to be “perfect” parents may end up with a tentative and insecure child. That said, we all know that what you see now is not necessarily what you will get many years from now. “Caterpillars” in childhood very often morph with time into beautiful butterflies. I have seen this occur many times in my few years as a school counsellor. The children who are anxious and unwilling to join in with school activities emerge into Middle School children, full of confidence and enthusiasm for life.

This change is often determined by how we deal with tentatively and anxiety in the earlier years. The five senses can be our greatest helpers.

1. Reminding Young Children of Their Safe, Happy Place

This is of extreme importance to any child who baulks at being separated from his/her parent. Help them identify and perhaps draw all of their happiest recollections on paper because their safest place often resides in their memory. These include:

- their favourite holiday place – eg. beach, grandparents' home, etc. (*sense of sight in their imagination*)
- their favourite songs (*hearing*)
- favourite food, and their associated smells
- names of the people who are important to them (*remembering loving arms and their touch*)
- special celebrations (*hearing those sounds in their imagination*)



All of the above can be illustrated on an A4 poster which can be stuck on their bedroom wall. This is a visual, daily reminder that the world is a safe place, full of nice things and people who love them. The child can be encouraged to draw upon these images when away from dad or mum. This releases the right sort of chemicals in the child's brain to replace the stress hormones in that situation.

2. Planning Ahead for Security

Going away for work or for a weekend without the children? Allow your anxious child the 'luxury' of having mum's presence around them while you are away. Little messages or tiny gifts under the pillow for when he/she goes to bed each night you are away, a familiar piece of your clothing to hang on to (and to sniff!) at night, and daytime notes in the lunchbox all ease the pain of separation. No doubt phone calls/zoom sessions help.

That umbilical cord of relationship between parent and child needs to be tangible and ever present so that the child is reassured of all the fears that loom. This is not an over-the-top request on behalf of the child. This is rather, a laying down of security for the future. There will soon come a day when none of this is necessary!

3. The Week Before

Anxiety escalates approximately a week before a separation takes place. It can be the beginning of the school year or term, before an Eisteddfod performance when we are alone on stage, or even before it's his turn for News at school where he is no longer one of the crowd but separated and out in front without his parents. Aim to deregulate anxiety beforehand by slowing down activities that stimulate adrenalin output in the child the week before.

This could include more time at home with familiar toys and routine, regular bedtime, less outings, (even fun ones like birthday parties if anxiety levels are high) and more one-on-one time with the child. Talks together could include tales of bravery, of parental confidence in the child, and of stories that deflect from high performance pressure. Dad and Mum might even consider adjourning to the bedroom for stressful adult conversations!

A child sponges up every scrap of sound and feeling from their environment without any filters. A sensory-minimised environment for a short season can be a game-changer.

