

Going Back to Work: Coping with Separation Anxiety

From the moment a child is born, she begins coping with separation. Birth is about as dramatic a separation as one will ever experience! From that point on, small separation events occur throughout children's lives. Going back to work, separating yourself from your child's daily patterns, routines, and affection can be an especially difficult phase. But it is important to remember that the potential resulting anxiety is just that – a phase. With the right attitude and techniques suited to your child and situation, you both will pass through stronger and happier.

Separation anxiety can begin at around 8-months-old and even appear through the first months of the 2nd year and beyond. As with most phases, their development and intensity will depend on the individual child. As a note, if you sense your child is overreacting to the separation for a long period of time, you may want to contact your pediatrician.

This phase coincides with the child developing a sense of "object permanence." This is the time when your baby begins the never-ending game of dropping things from the highchair, stroller, or wherever he's got the opportunity! Although this game may be tiresome for parents, it is helping the child understand that things that go away do return (even if Mommy's face isn't so smiley by the 27th time). The concept of object and person permanence should be fully developed by the 2nd year or so.

The second issue, of course, is that children this age also lack a sense of time, and this increases their anxiety. They don't know what you mean by "in a minute" or "just a sec" or "right back." It will take incremental practice for them to learn that, even if you do not appear almost immediately, as in a game of peek-a-boo, you will return. You can start by allowing your child to crawl or walk away from you and not following for a few seconds. In this way, you are simultaneously giving her the confidence to explore her independence and giving her the security of knowing you are around. It is this tug-of-war between the desire to be independent and the need to be near you that will keep this phase interesting for a while!

An important myth to address is that too much attention and affection will make it more difficult for your child to overcome separation anxiety. William Sears, MD and Martha Sears, RN reassure us with these words: "Separation anxiety is often a measure of how secure a baby's attachment is and how securely he will ease into independence." And, "the stronger the attachment, the more easily a child gains independence." While the experts caution us not to overdo it, not to become hovering parents, healthy attachment with plenty of affection and time spent together will give the child the security and self-confidence to move out into the world on his own.

Here are some tips to prepare for your return to work:

- Talk with your child about your going back to work well in advance. Explain in a positive way, as best you can, all of the wants and needs surrounding this return.

- Emphasize your love for him and the special things you will do together when you return for the day, on weekends, etc. over how much you will miss one another.
- Introduce your child to different people and environments. If the child will be going to daycare, schedule some visits together prior to your start back to work.
- If a caregiver is coming into your home, be sure to schedule 2-3 opportunities for her/him to spend time in your home while you are there to observe.
- Start slowly, with short separations, to build confidence.
- It is helpful if the child is fed and well-rested before you leave.
- Try to spend 15 minutes or so reading or playing with her before you leave.
- While it is not always possible to avoid, rushing around prior to your departure increases the stress level for everyone.
- Keep your tone and your body language light and confident when you leave.
- Once you leave, do not come right back in because you are feeling guilty or the sound of your child's crying is difficult to hear – this sends the signal that separation is *not* okay.
- Promise an activity for your return that day: reading a favorite story, snuggle time, etc.

Going back to work will take some adjustment time for everyone; there is no getting around it. But stay positive and keep in mind that this is healthy for everyone. Your love and affection have built strong bonds of attachment, which will give your child strength and security throughout this phase and throughout the rest of her life!

All the best to you and your family,

The NannyPro Team

References:

1. www.kidshealth.org
2. www.aap.org (American Academy of Pediatrics)
3. *The Baby Book*; William Sears, MD & Martha Sears, RN; 1993
4. *What to Expect: the Toddler Years*; Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi Murkoff, Sandee E. Hathaway, BSN; 1994