

## Parenting Tips for Dealing with Separation Related Anxiety

Anxiety occurs when we overestimate a risk and underestimate our ability to cope. For a young person dealing with separation anxiety they have the basic feeling that they are unsafe unless they are with you, the parent. In fact, the brain is playing a trick on the child, telling the child how awful it would be to never see a parent again. In doing so these thoughts manipulate the child's feelings terribly, all the while withholding the information on how unlikely these events are really to occur. Most parents, when put into this situation, offer lots of reassurance, but the answer is to recast the issue, (eg a "good bye" is actually a "see ya' later"). Below are some tips to help you manage your child's anxieties related to separation.

### **Re-label the experience**

Give the voice they hear or images they see in their head, (also known as our thoughts), a name, such as 'brain bug' or 'Mr Worry'. Then teach the child to begin bossing back this voice or taking control of their thoughts. For example, when you see your child begin to worry say, "Mr Worry leave Lewis alone! He doesn't want you around. He wants to be calm and have fun!" By modelling this language eventually your child will begin to use this strategy on their own and as a result learn how to self-soothe.

Also, role-play with your child how to teach Mr Worry some new lessons, namely that the child doesn't have to worry, that parents do come back, and that thinking bad things only makes the child feel more scared, it doesn't make the bad thing more true.

### **Turn 'what ifs' into 'if-thens'**

Take your child's 'what ifs' and begin to phrase them with "if that happens then this will be the consequence." For example, if a child says "What if you aren't home when I get home from work?" The parent can try to respond with, "If I'm not home, that means I am at the grocery store." Make sure you are giving your child accurate information.

### **Begin to challenge awful thoughts by asking "how likely?"**

If your child thinks that you will be in a car accident while he is away at school. Ask your child, "How many car accidents have I ever been in?" Again provide your child with accurate information and this information will be the evidence that the thought is inaccurate. Teach them that the mere presence of a thought does not increase the likelihood that it will come true.

### **Slow down the runaway train**

Anxiety can make children get out of control, fast! When you see your child begin to fall apart, compassionately direct him to slow his body down. Say something like, "In a minute when you are breathing slower, you'll feel better and we can talk about this." Avoid saying, "calm down." This typically makes children, (and adults), angry, so instead instruct them on how to actually calm down.

### **Cue cards**

Give your child cue cards with helpful thoughts on them for those times when they start to worry. For example, write on a card, "Mommy loves me, she'll be back soon. Go away Mr Worry!"

### **Praise success**

Make sure you are recognising your child's successes. This is really hard work for them! Use sticker charts to keep track of your child's progress.

### **Good-Bye books**

Make a book for your child to read while you are away. In the beginning of the story have the child saying good-bye to the parent; in the middle have pictures and directions for what the child can do while the parent is out, (read, draw, play a game), and end the story with a happy reunion.

### **Practice brief separations**

Remember your child needs more practice with separations, not less!

### **Make good-bye short and sweet**

Remember that your child will adjust within a couple minutes of you leaving. Make up a special good-bye routine with your child, as this will give your child another chance to enjoy you before leaving.

### **Transitional objects**

This could include pictures, toys, a favourite book or a snack. The idea is that the child is bringing a little piece of you with them.

### **Build a fear hierarchy**

Help your child take baby steps to overcoming his fear. Teach the child how to rate his anxiety or fear. Use the analogy of a thermometer where zero means no worry and ten is maximum worry, (so a six would probably look like a child is fairly worried but still able to do a task; an eight would maybe be a child is very worried but only able to separate from parent if forced to). Have the child identify a goal which is to occur in the future, such as spending the night at a friend's house. Have them rank this event, probably a nine or ten. Then identify small steps the child can take to reach that top goal. Then start at the bottom. DO NOT move up to the next step on the ladder until the child can complete the task and rate their anxiety as a two or lower. Also, remember to reward each step, your child is actually facing his fears which is really hard work! For an example see the Ladder for Brave Behaviours below.

For more tips and strategies I recommend reading *Freeing Your Child From Anxiety* by Tamar Chansky, Ph.D. The book is written for parents whom have children who worry.