

Separations & Changes in the Early Years

Separations & Changes in the Early Years Understanding the Anxieties of Parents & Children From Birth to Four Years

When babies are born they leave the warm and comfortable world of the womb and enter an unknown world. It is their first experience of separation and the beginning of a lifelong series of steps and challenges. Each stage of the process – weaning, going to the child-minder, and starting school, leaving home – is marked by a separation. Our early experiences colour the ways that we respond to all the other experiences of separation during our lifetime.

The strong emotions that babies feel from birth, including joy, sadness, anxiety and rage, are partly a response to the separation from their mother. This is normal. And it is not only the baby who can feel this – mothers also have to adjust to letting go of the baby inside and facing the demands and needs of a separate human being. Fathers and partners will initially have the supportive role of looking after the mother baby relationship and adjusting to the changes in their relationship with their partner.

It is a highly charged time emotionally for everybody, and one that represents an enormous change for the whole family.



Forming attachments

In the first year of life, children need to experience secure attachment to a caring adult. Babies often experience secure attachments with more than one adult, but for most babies the first bond

with their mother is the most important. The experience of a secure attachment may also come from a carer, the extended family or another mother or father figure. Children who are able to form secure attachments are likely to be more resilient and to be able to manage stressful events better later in life.

Letting go

The process of separating from your baby is a gradual one. In the early weeks babies develop emotionally and physically from having all their needs closely met. Security comes from not having to wait too long to be fed or cuddled. Giving comfort and reassurance, and responding quickly to the baby's needs, does not 'spoil' them at this stage.

Babies gradually have to learn to tolerate being part of a wider community where the needs of other children, and mother herself, also have to be met. Both you and the baby have to learn to separate yourselves from one another – to let go of that 'all-in-oneness' you might have had at an earlier stage.

For some mothers it can be a relief to let go of the very dependent baby stage. The baby may be equally ready to move on and, some time during the first year, the mother can really enjoy seeing her baby become more independent in playing and settling down. But for other mothers and their babies, this transition presents more of a hurdle. These mothers sometimes say 'My baby won't let me put her down'.

Changing your baby's routine

Mothers and babies are all individuals with different temperaments, strengths and weaknesses, so for each mother and baby the time for change and separation will also be different. For the baby to develop, it is necessary for you to gradually let go – to begin to say 'no' to your thriving baby when they demand one more feed or want to be held in your arms all the time. This is another kind of separation.

Older babies grow both emotionally and mentally through coping with the experience of their mother being less available to them. This is how the baby learns to manage their frustration, develop their thinking, their sense of themselves as a separate person and their capacity to cope more independently.

When babies play games like peepo, they find out that people, toys and other things that go away, reappear later. They soon become so confident that these have not disappeared forever that they learn to drop their toys on purpose. Games like these can help mothers and babies come to terms with separating – a light-hearted way of getting used to the comings and goings that are part of this developmental stage.

Moments like these can signal an opportunity to start letting go and allowing your baby to rest and play more independently. This lead may well come from the baby.

It can be difficult to keep in mind how important separating is, especially as it can arouse feelings of loss and sadness in both parents' and their child. Sometimes it is the parent who is reluctant to let go, sometimes it is the baby or it may be a bit of both. It is necessary to allow for these feelings in yourself, as well as in the baby, rather than pretending that the feelings don't exist and trying to return to an earlier more comfortable stage.

Adjusting to change

Many mothers have concerns and anxieties about changing their baby's routines and, especially, about letting go of the comfort and security of the breast or bottle-feed. Babies often rage and protest in such a way that mothers may become fearful that they could suffer some emotional effects – or even cause themselves physical harm. You can usually sense whether your baby will get over it and begin to adjust to the new situation or whether they need to go back to their previous routine for a little while longer.

The father, or another close adult, can play an important part at this stage by supporting the mother and helping her set limits on her availability to the baby while, at the same time, developing their own relationship with the baby.

Adoptive and foster parents have a more challenging task. They have to take into account the experience for the baby, and for them, of the earlier separation from the birth mother. This experience is part of the baby's history and cannot be wiped out.

Coping with feelings about going back to work

Women form a large proportion of the workforce and many of them have babies and young children. Some mothers work from choice, others work because they have to. There is some evidence to suggest that work can protect vulnerable mothers from postnatal depression.

Many of us still carry around in our heads the myth that being a good mother means never leaving the baby. So, mothers sometimes feel some guilt and concern about being at work and worry about how it will affect their baby, perhaps finding it difficult to allow another into the relationship with their child.

Separation is a wrench and it helps a great deal if the people around you and the baby – at home and at work – are sensitive to your feelings. Then you can approach later separations with more confidence.

Some fathers or partners will be able to take leave from work during the early months of the baby's life and arrange flexible working to share or take over child care.

Arranging childcare

Babies and young children need to feel a sense of security and continuity to enable them to thrive. You need to be confident that your child's emotional, as well as physical, needs are met in their childcare setting. So – whatever your own feelings might be about handing over your child's care to another person – you need to look for a situation where your child can form an attachment to a consistent carer who will be receptive and will respond sensitively and consistently to your child's communications.

Parents may feel a home-based arrangement makes most sense for themselves and their child at the earliest stage. Comings and goings are likely to be smoother and more easily handled when the child is left with a familiar person, so childcare provided by a member of an extended family or a friend could be the most comfortable arrangement. Alternatively, home-based care can be provided by a registered child-minder in the child-minder's home or a nanny in the child's own home.

Coping with the child's feelings about childcare

Some babies and young children are fine about being separated from their mother or carer but many of them feel some anxiety. It is very important to take particular care to address the emotional needs of your baby or young child when they are going to be separated from you while you go to work. Take time over introducing the baby to their new carer and be alert to the atmosphere of your baby's surroundings.

It is important to plan and prepare for parting and for coming back together, as these transition times are difficult for the baby and for you.

For instance, you can ease the parting by leaving your child with a loved object – a favorite teddy or piece of blanket – or something familiar of your own that smells of you and feels like part of you.

No matter what kind of childcare is arranged, babies and young children can experience separation anxiety. This means that when the mother (or another adult to whom the baby is attached – their father or a 'mother-figure') leaves, the baby may show signs of panic, distress or rage. Crying and clinging are normal reactions. The baby may feel they are 'falling apart' without the comfort of the person who is most familiar to them. It is not unusual for the baby to be cold and withdrawn when their mother comes back, giving mother the experience of feeling rejected.

It will take a little time for you to see whether your child has settled. The tears and tantrums when you leave, and clinging or rejection when you come back, are not necessarily a sign that your child has not settled, but may be an expression of how they feel about the separation. This is to be expected when a baby moves into the wider world and has to adjust to the changes. It does not necessarily mean that you have made the wrong choice of childcare, or that you should give up work.

Starting at a pre-school or nursery school

Starting pre-school or nursery school is an important stage in the separation process and the feelings aroused or battles waged at an earlier stage often re-emerge at this point. Many children embrace this change without a backward glance. It is sometimes the mother in this situation who feels sad and disappointed at having to let go and move on.

Some children feel very ready for the stimulus of other children, toys, educational challenges and all that the new world of pre-school or nursery school has to offer. But many young children who are developing normally nevertheless find this particular stage of life very difficult. They may express their feelings through crying and clinging. They may also return to baby habits and behaviour, such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting or accidents at school, tantrums and baby language. It is as if they are giving their parents the message that they want to go backwards to a more comfortable time rather than forwards to the next stage. It is common for parents to see enormous swings between moods of great dependence and independence – a little baby one minute and an assertive and exploratory three-year-old the next.

At this stage, some children may be very withdrawn and shy within groups, while others may show aggression and rivalry with others. Parents can be reassured that these extremes of mood and behaviour are normal and are not signs that their child is disturbed.

Helping your child to settle

Parents can help their children to settle by showing them that they understand their feelings, while also encouraging them to move forward confidently. Games involving fantasy and role-playing are fun and are also an important way for children to sort out, with their peers and with their new carers, what they feel about all the changes and new experiences.

Some helpful suggestions

- Any separation can provoke a sense of loss and be emotionally unsettling for both children and parents. Take it a step at a time – it needs to be a gradual process.
- Some changes of routine are experienced as a separation – moving on from breast or bottle-feeds, when the baby moves out of their parents' bedroom, if the family moves house.
- Prepare children for any change that is coming and try not to spring it on them. It helps to talk about it and rehearse for it – by acting it out as a game, for instance.
- Don't slip out without saying goodbye. Your child will trust you and be more confident if you say goodbye and acknowledge their feelings directly.
- A firm and confident goodbye at pre-school or nursery school tells your distressed child that you know they'll be able to cope. It's better not to hover and appear anxious.
- Separation encourages your child's developing independence even though it may cause stress at first.
- Most of us thrive on a healthy mix of stable routines and new challenges. Children do, too.

A child of this age who had the attention they needed at an earlier stage, is likely to have the invaluable tools of play and language to take their development a step further. Children who can talk about their feelings as a parent leaves, or who find a way of enacting what they are going through, can gradually make sense of their feelings and increase their capacity to tolerate these experiences. They can then move on to exploring the whole range of opportunities that new environments have to offer.

In a good pre-school or nursery setting, young children have the opportunity to learn a range of new skills and to sort out complicated feelings about themselves and others. Through playing and learning, they find out more themselves and the world around them.

They have a chance to prepare themselves for the next step, when they will enter the more formal world of primary school.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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