

INSIGHTS

Managing separation anxiety at school drop-offs



Going to school for most children is a positive experience however some children can struggle making the transition from their home environment to school. It's naturally distressing to see your child upset at school drop-off but there is a great deal you can do to make school drop-offs easier for you and your child.

Breaking the cycle of separation anxiety at school

A child's clinginess, crying or tantrums at school drop-off can be disturbing for you as a parent. Despite putting on a brave face, you can feel guilty that somehow you're the cause of this behaviour. Unless something traumatic has occurred then leaving your child at school is a normal part of life, something your child will get used to. The following strategies may help eradicate your child's tears and fears when you take them to school:

Tell the story

Prepare your child thoroughly each morning for what will happen when you leave your child at school. Repeat the story each morning before school so they can fully prepare for drop-off.

It takes two

Involve your child's teacher in the drop-off process as they will be the person who must deal with an upset child. In extreme examples, at the start of term or after a long absence, a later starting time may give your child a chance to say goodbye in more relaxed circumstances.

Give me five

Rituals are both personal and reassuring so develop a special goodbye ritual that you consistently use when you leave your child each morning. Your special ritual may be simple such as a special wave or kiss, or fun such as a high five, low five, fist pump bursting into a hand explosion. Then leave quickly without stalling or looking back. Avoid making leaving a bigger deal than it what it is.

Reduce the rush

Is your child a morning star or night owl? Many children are slow starters in the morning, which can mean that they're frequently rushed and arrive at school in highly anxious states. Do all you can to reduce morning stress, which may include earlier bed and waking times; laying out school clothes the previous evening and making minimal demands on their time.

This is the place

parenting * ideas

Location carries memory so choose carefully the place you say goodbye to your child. If a kiss or hug at the school-gate means a happy child, then you've probably found your goodbye place. Experiment with your goodbye location until you find one that works.

It's your job

If goodbyes continue to cause tears, tantrums or clinginess consider, if possible, saying goodbye to your child at home and allowing another adult – your partner or another parent – to take your child to school.

If separation anxiety continues

If your child's separation anxiety interferes with their concentration and learning, prevents them from making friends, is excessive and goes longer than a month, consider getting professional support. Separation anxiety left unchecked can lead to school refusal and other anxiety disorders later on.

For professional support consult with welfare teacher at your child's school, your local general practitioner or local council for suitable health care professionals in the area.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.