

# LADC Behavior Handout



## Separation Anxiety

Learn how to help your child to feel brave when separating from a parent



## Strategies to Help Your Child Feel Brave

Will your child not leave your side when in social situations? Does your child cry when you drop them off at school? Does your child complain of stomachaches or not feeling well a lot when they are at school? It is possible that your child is having difficulties with separation anxiety. It is best to intervene now with your child before they enter into elementary school and it gets worse or causes more dysfunction in their day. There are a lot of good strategies to help your child!

Books are one way to help start educating your child about what they are experiencing. Children respond well to hearing information from books! You could try checking out some from the library to see which book your child likes the most. The following is a list of books that help to talk about the difficulty of separating from a parent:

1. The Missing Mommy Cure: Helps Relieve Separation Anxiety
2. Llama Llama Misses Momma
3. The Kissing Hand
4. Mommy, Don't Go
5. I Don't Want to Go to School
6. The Invisible String

The most important part to remember is that you do not want to allow your child to avoid school, situations, or activities due to their fears, as that will only reinforce the fear that something bad might happen. Instead, you want to slowly modify the support that is provided to your child! For example, your child may start screaming if you were to leave them at school alone. So, you could start by sitting next to them as they are engaging in the preschool classroom, next you could be standing behind them while they are interacting within the classroom. You will slowly fade out how much presence you have in the classroom. You could also initially stay for 15 minutes, then you could stay for only 10, then 5, then 2, and then leave right at drop-off. You would slowly fade that over many days or weeks. When coming back to pick your child up from school or an activity, make sure that you are there slightly before or when it ends so that your child is not waiting. This will help to ease some fears of not having the parent return.

Another important aspect of separation anxiety is the parent's fears themselves. Are the separations hard for you? Do you sometimes give in to your child's cries for more time with you because it is also hard for you to separate? In order for interventions to be successful, it is important to understand the role parents and their fears may play into the behavior. Slowly overtime your fears will go away as well by allowing your child to separate from you. However, you don't want to express your fears to your child or have your child see you react anxiously to situations. Remember, you need to model to your child what calm looks like. After you leave their classroom or step out the door, then it is okay for you to start crying or begin to show worry on your face but when in the presence of your child, make sure you are modeling calm behaviors! If you are an overly anxious parent, it might be easier for the less anxious parent to take your child to school or activities initially.

### Creating a Goodbye Routine

When dropping off your child it is important to not sneak out on your child or the next time it will be even harder to separate. It is important to develop a goodbye routine with your child so that there is consistency. It is good to practice this routine ahead of time when there is no anticipated separation so that your child is calm and can fully understand the expectations and routine. You could create a secret handshake or have a secret goodbye phrase. Allow your child to be involved in the process of creating the goodbye routine. Once the routine is completed, stick to the plan and leave. Don't wait around or hesitate, as children will pick up on your hesitations. Remember, sometimes the behavior will get worse before it gets better but be consistent and don't give in!

### Offer Choices

Sometimes, providing choices to your child helps them gain a sense of control over a situation that makes them anxious. You could have 2 different goodbye routines and they could choose which one to do that day. You could have them choose which activity they want to do first after separation. You could have them choose which calming strategy they would like to try. You could have them choose which parent they would like to drop them off. When offering choices, only offer 2 choices so that it is not overwhelming to your child.

## Calming Strategies

We also need to teach our children how to cope with their fear. There are many different types of calming strategies and you know your child best so try the strategies that you think your child is developmentally capable of doing and the strategies that you think will help them to be the most successful! All strategies should be practiced when the child is calm so that they can learn the new techniques. Reinforce their practicing behavior to get them excited about the strategies and to be successful in implementing them during separation.

### Belly Breathing

First you want to teach your child how to belly breathe. It is important that when they are breathing, they are breathing with their stomach rather than their chest. You can teach them that when we breathe in, we want our belly to push out and get bigger and when they breathe out, the stomach goes back to normal! Help them practice by having them lay on the ground and place a stuffed animal on their stomach. As they breathe in, they want to see how high up they can get their animal to go, and as they breathe out they want to see the stuffed animal ride back down.

### Blowing a Balloon

You can start with having your child blowing up a real balloon and then move towards a pretend balloon once they have the visual. When using the pretend balloon, have you and child cup hands together and encourage your child to hold them in front of their mouth. Take a deep breath in and as they breathe out, have them slowly expand their hands as if the balloon is inflating. When the balloon is big enough, have them breathe in and when they breathe out this time, have them deflate their balloon. Repeat 5 times with your child!

### Birthday Candles

Hold up five fingers for your child. As you hold them up, you can have them help you count them to five or you can count the candles for them! After counting the candles, have them take a deep breath and blow out each "candle". Each breathe the blow out, put one of your fingers down until all of the "candles" are gone!

### Tense and Relax

Have your child slowly tense and relax different parts of the body. When squeezing their hands, have them imagine squeezing all the juice out of lemons. In order to tense their shoulders have them pull their shoulders up to their ears and pretend they are a turtle tucking down into their shell. To tense the shoulders again, have your child pretend to be a cat stretching by bringing their arms all the way up trying to touch the ceiling and have them try and reach back as far as they can. Finally, to tense their feet and legs, have them imagine stepping in the mud puddle and trying to get their feet to reach the bottom of the mud by pushing their feet hard against the ground.