

Learning to Say Goodbye

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It's time to go to work, or you need to leave your child with a caregiver for a few hours. As you try to walk out the door, your child starts crying, kicking, and whining. You may feel guilty about leaving and embarrassed that your child is acting like this. But what do you do?

As bad as this might make you feel, remember that your child's behavior is normal. Young children often don't like having to be separated from their parents, but they need to learn to say goodbye. Your child needs chances to learn that although you leave, you will come back. Remember, too, that those tantrums are a sign that your child loves you. As children learn that a parent who is leaving will come back, they begin to feel more secure, and saying goodbye becomes easier.

How to Make Good-byes Easier

There are some things you can do to help your child prepare for you to leave.

- Let your child know what to expect. Explain what will happen while you are gone: "You're going to Grandma's. She'll make cookies with you today."
- Let your child know when you are coming back. Use a time frame that she will understand such as after a routine activity: "I'll be back when your nap is over."
- If you're taking your child somewhere away from home, let him take a favorite blanket or toy. Something familiar can help ease unsure feelings.
- Tell your child you are leaving—don't just disappear. This will help your child develop the security she needs, and it will make good-byes easier in the long run.
- Keep your good-byes short. Give your child a quick hug and kiss, then leave. Long good-byes can make things more difficult.
- Follow a routine. If you leave your child every day, saying goodbye in the same way each time helps him know what to expect and feel more secure.
- Call if any plans change or if you'll be late to keep your child from worrying or being afraid that you won't return. Staying in touch will build trust.

What to Do If You're Feeling Worried

Though there may be tears when you leave, remember that your child will probably be playing happily a few minutes later. If you are upset or worried about leaving your child, you can do some things to ease your concern.

- Let your caregiver know of any special needs or desires your child has, such as a stuffed animal at naptime, a special snack, or a favorite story.
- After you reach your destination, call the caregiver to see how your child is doing.

What to Do When You Come Back

Coming back to your child should be a good experience. There are ways to make this time an important part of learning to say goodbye:

- When you return, take a few minutes to give your child some special attention: "Taylor, I'm so glad to see you! Let me see your puzzle."
- Share with your child what went on while the two of you were apart.
- Ask your child's caregiver how their time went. Find out what your child did while you were gone so you can talk about it together.
- Don't be surprised if your child ignores you. Remember that he may be busy playing, or she may still be angry that you left. Your child is still learning about good-byes.

What to Do If You'll Be Away for a Long Time

There may be times when separation is more difficult for you and your child. Sometimes parents must leave for several days or more. To make long separations easier, try these ideas:

- Give your child photos of family members to look at while you are away.
- Leave Mom's favorite sweater or Dad's T-shirt; sometimes a familiar item will comfort a child.
- Record your child's favorite story on a cassette tape to listen to while you're gone.
- Call your child while you're away, but keep in mind that hearing your voice may be upsetting.

When children have a really hard time with separations, they may show grief, loss, anger, and clinging, whining, or babyish behavior like thumb sucking or having toilet accidents. Remember that it takes time to learn to accept change. Be patient and reassuring. Children need parents to be calm and confident as they learn to say goodbye.

Resources That Help

Sometimes books can help children understand saying goodbye. You may want to read one or more of the books listed here to your child. Check your local library or bookstore for these and other books about saying goodbye.

- *Anna Marie's Blanket* by Joanne Barkan (Barron's Educational Series, 1993).
- *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch (Firefly Books Ltd., 1986).
- *First Day at Day Care* by Ellen Weiss (Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division, 1996).
- *Will You Come Back for Me?* by Ann Tompert (Albert Whitman & Company, 1988).

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