

USE S.P.A.C.E TO SUPPORT CHILDREN EXPERIENCING SEPARATION ANXIETY

Supporting a child experiencing separation anxiety can be challenging and confusing as an educator, especially if you've never been trained in this area. There are certain things that may help and hinder. The most important need for a child experiencing separation anxiety is to feel safe & connected. A felt sense of safety calms the 'emotion centre' of the brain (the amygdala) and allows the 'thinking & problem solving brain' (the prefrontal cortex) to function. When this happens the child can then engage in play, learning and socialising. They can experience positive, engaged moments that will support their sense of enjoyment, reassure their brain that they're safe, and reduce their anxiety over time (although this is not a linear process!).

I've put together an acronym to support anyone caring for a child who is having a tough time separating from their caregivers. It's called S.P.A.C.E!

- **Safe Haven**
- **Predictability**
- **Attuned Playfulness**
- **Connection**
- **Empathy**



All of these approaches will help the child to feel to safe and connected so that their brain can switch out of fight, flight, freeze mode and into a more alert & peaceful state - ready to engage in the moment!

SAFE HAVEN

Being a Safe Haven for a child is about building a relationship with them where they feel welcomed, appreciated and celebrated for the wonderful, unique child that they are.

A great way to do this is to help the child to feel seen and heard by actively listening to them; letting them know that their thoughts and ideas are important; and by allowing them to express their emotions with you.

What we're essentially talking about here is Attachment. We want each child to form an attachment with an educator that will act as their safe base to return to or lean on during overwhelming or anxious moments. A great place to start is by getting to know what makes the child tick and engaging in their interests - you might even put them in the educator role and ask them to teach you all about Pokemon, rare fish, exotic icecream flavours or whatever they're passionate about. Hint: their parents probably know a lot about what their child loves so connecting with them around this may help if the child is not overly forthcoming yet.

Speaking of parents, it's important to build a strong connection with the child's parents as the more confident they feel that you can support their child, the safer their child will feel. Encouraging the parents to share special events, successes and joys from their child's life with you can be a great way to bring those moments into the classroom and create connections to their world at home. And ofcourse, be sure to share their child's progress and strengths from within the classroom.



"The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma & thrive. Relationships are the agents of change & the most powerful therapy is human love."

Bruce Perry

PREDICTABILITY

Offering predictability and a clear routine for all children can be important, and this is especially true for a child experiencing separation anxiety. Predictability and routine can provide a sense of safety and reassurance of what's to come, when everything else may feel uncertain for the child.

Visuals can be a great way to show children the plan for the day ahead. You could even offer the child the opportunity to take a visual card away once the task or event has happened as this will give them a small sense of control in their day.

As much as possible, work with the child's parent to create a calm, confident, routine for drop-offs as this can often be when separation anxiety peaks. Now, for each family this is going to look different depending on how the child responds. Yes, many children will respond better to a quick, but present farewell with their parents. There will also be kids that need their parents to stick around a little longer and settle them in. Be led by the child - if their parent staying for 10 minutes helps them separate then encourage that, if it causes their anxiety to build then try a shorter farewell.

Where possible, try to communicate changes to the morning routine to the family in advance (eg. Staffing changes) so that they can have a heads up and time to recalibrate to the change.

I am a firm believer that all daycare's, kinder and primary schools should offer families a Social Story specific to their centre. A short, visual story with 6-10 photos with messages of safety (eg. Your teachers will take care of you; you're safe at kinder; your parents/carers will pick you up at the end of the session.") can go a long way for most children entering a new environment.



"Predictable routines and rhythms to your day help children to feel secure and confident, which improves behaviour, relationships & independence".

LR Knost

ATTUNED PLAYFULNESS

Playfulness is often an under-utilised strategy when it comes to supporting children and it can be SO powerful. You can use play to create a moment of connection with the child; to allow them to express themselves; to ease the tension in their body and more.

Play can be a wonderful stress-reliever for children when it is tailored to the individual. The goal is to use play to bring about laughter or to support the child to enter a 'flow' state where their nervous system is nicely regulated. For some children it might look like engaging in a game of "would you rather", questions about their favourite topic or doing a puzzle together, and for other kids it might be engaging in a game of hide and seek or joining in their imaginary play.

Wherever possible, let the child take the lead, however there are also approaches such as Attachment Play that can equip you with ideas for need-specific play. These games begin as adult-led but can become child-led. Here are some examples:

Nonsense Play such as pretending you need the child to show you where their bag should go because you've completely forgotten! Does it go on their friends head? In the principals office? Who knows!?

Power-reversal Play such as 'Magic Wand' where you offer the child the power to turn you into any animal they want for 2 minutes.

Contingency Play such as 'Simon Says' where there is a level of predictability to the game combined with fun.

It's important to note that if a child is upset and crying, offering connection & empathy is more appropriate than play in that moment - we don't want the child to feel mocked or as if they're feelings are being ignored. A better time for play is when the child may be nervous but not crying - it can help them feel more relaxed and move them out of a flight or freeze state.



"Safety is not the absence of threat. It is the presence of connection."

Gabor Mate

CONNECTION

Connection is about meeting the child where they're at, in the moment. It's about becoming curious as to what this individual child needs. When it comes to connecting with a child, getting down on their level, using a gentle tone and giving them time to communicate will never go astray!

Sometimes our more anxious feeling kids need time to process their thoughts and express themselves so patience is important.

Once you've connected with them you might ask yourself "What does this child need?" and the answer might be:

- to have their feelings validated;
- to feel safe to cry;
- to move their body by dancing, yoga or swinging;
- to use a fidget toy or have a sensory break;
- to hold an educators hand or receive reassurance;
- playfulness;
- to cuddle their transition toy.

Where possible, be mindful of the child's nonverbal cues - they can tell us a lot about how they're feeling & what they might need. Fidgeting hands? Offer a fidget toy. Wiggly legs? Offer some climbing or a tramp. Tears? Welcome them and hold space. Nail biting? Help them name what they're feeling.



"The biggest antidote to separation anxiety at school is connection at school - feeling deeply cared for, seen, welcomed by at least one adult at school."

Karen Young

EMPATHY

Offer the child empathy in spades! The feeling of being separated from their caregivers can be completely overwhelming for a child. Take a moment to really put yourself in their shoes. It feels pretty big, hey?

Children don't need us to convince them that they're OK - they need us to tune into what they're feeling and let them know that it makes sense - ofcourse it's hard to be away from their parents!

In fact, when we tell a crying child that they are OK, it can create a disconnect because their body is clearly telling them that something doesn't feel good, meanwhile the adult in their care is saying they're fine. What we can do is validate their experience, welcome their healing tears and reassure them that they're safe, for example, some combination of:

**"It feels so hard to be away from your parents right now."
"I get that you're feeling sad. It's a big feeling and it will pass."
"You're safe here. You can stay with me."**

You might even be playful in the moment if the child engages, for example:

**"It's hard to say goodbye to your parents. Should we wave goodbye with our feet? Or should we try to blow them out the door with our breath?"
or "You're upset to say goodbye. I wonder...if this feeling was an animal, what would it be? A sloth? A dragon?"**



"It's crucial to keep in mind that no matter how nonsensical and frustrating our child's feelings may seem to us, they are real and important to our child. It's vital that we treat them as such in our responses.

Dan Siegel

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ANXIETY

Here are some key things to remember about anxiety:

- Anxiety can show up as anger. If this happens, separate the emotion from the behaviour Eg. “I can see you’re feeling worried, that’s OK, but I can’t let you hit Jamie. Shall we try stomping around instead?”
- Anxiety, to varying degrees, shows up in life for everybody. Yes, these kids may experience more of it SO let’s use this opportunity to teach them about their brains (a whole classroom approach is ideal). We don’t need to take away the child’s anxiety, we need to help them cope with the feeling so that they can move through it and become masters of their anxiety, rather than fearing or denying it. Imagine giving them this gift for life?!
- Anxiety feels uncomfortable because adrenaline and other hormones have been dumped into our body and they have nowhere to go. Karen Young refers to this as Super Body Fuel. This is also why movement helps because it moves that fuel out of our body, and with it that “ick” feeling of anxiety.
- Anxiety puts a child into the fight / flight / freeze state which means a few important things. One: the child is unable to access the logical, problem solving part of their brain when they feel this way. And two: we need to first and foremost support them to feel safe before they can access this other part of their brain that will allow them to learn and engage in their day.

If you get one thing out of this resource let it be this:

The child feeling separation anxiety needs to feel safe and connected before anything else!



“When we see a behaviour that is problematic or confusing, the first question we should ask isn’t “how do we get rid of it?” but rather “what is this telling us about the child?”

Mona Delahooke

RAISING RESILIENCE MORNINGTON PENINSULA

OUR SERVICES

Family Mental Health for Professionals Workshop

Family Mental Health for Parents Workshop

1:1 Parenting Consults

GET IN TOUCH

If you want to chat further about separation anxiety or any other topic relating to children's emotional and mental health, please reach out - we'd love to hear from you and offer support wherever we can.

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I am on a mission to equip parents and anyone caring for children with the knowledge and skills **to help children feel seen, heard and understood.** I take an emotion focused, beyond behaviour, play based approach that is backed by evidence & a bucket load of compassion.

Jess Demetriou

Please note that this resource is general in nature. If you support or parent a child who is experiencing separation anxiety and you believe they need further support, please seek the assistance needed.

