

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## Helping Children Cope With Separation

Although a strong relationship with parents helps children to let go when the time comes, the first separations are never easy. During their first three years, many children cannot bear to let their parents leave. When parents leave, the baby may cry as if she has been abandoned forever. The toddler clings to his mother when she reaches for her coat. They get this ability at 7-8 months. **Before** then, they cry less, because they forget the parent quickly.

Children who are separated from their parents often experience a variety of emotions such as anger, guilt, jealousy, confusion, hurt, and fear.

Preschool children may regress to outgrown behavior--whining, crying, bed wetting--or may become more aggressive and demanding.

Separation fears may be more intense in children who are temperamentally "slow-to-warm-up" and have difficulty making transitions or entering new situations.

### **Security Blanket or Favorite Toy** (Psychologists call these transitional objects)

A favorite toy or blanket can help your child feel more confident and secure. Research shows that children who are given "transitional objects" cry less when they are separated from their parents. These children are also able to explore their environment more actively and focus on and learn new tasks better than those without them.

### **Parent Guilt About Separation**

Parents often feel guilty and distressed about their child's natural protest to separation and may unwittingly prolong and reinforce a separation reaction.

You can err in both ways: leaving too soon or not leaving soon enough. It takes judgement. Don't leave without saying goodbye. And don't linger when it is time to leave. Reassure your preschooler through your words and your actions that everything will be fine in your absence.

### **Suggestions for Parents**

- ♥ Before you leave, tell the child you are leaving, and when you will return. It may help to say something like "...and I'll pick you up at 11 o'clock **just like last week.**" In order to bear separation, the child must know the parent **will return.**
- ♥ After you say you are leaving, then **leave.** If you linger because of the child's whining, then you are teaching your child to whine to get what he/she wants.
- ♥ Expressing affection for your child is appropriate, but separation is made more difficult if you, the parent, verbally or nonverbally express ambivalence, guilt, worry, or uncertainty about leaving the child. The parent's emotional response to separation

is a common cause to the child's emotional response.

- ♥ Practice with brief separations first. Show your child that you reliably return.
- ♥ Don't be late to pick your child up! Be early or on time. Children can get very distressed when all the other children have been picked up.
- ♥ Provide a consistent routine that children can count on. Most adults feel more secure when they know what is going to happen next. Children need a routine even more.
- ♥ Get them used to new people gradually. Children feel more secure when they know and trust their caregivers. If your child is slow to adapt to new situations, then give this advice a few weeks to work. Make the transition easy.
- ♥ Separation anxiety is normal. On rare occasions, however, it may indicate a problem. Talk to your child and your day care provider about what your child experiences at day care. Perhaps your child is teased by other children, or afraid of a pet, or the teacher looks like mean Uncle Albert. In cases like this, when separation anxiety persists, you must seek the cause yourself because it will be unique to your situation. Parents can diminish a great deal of childhood anxiety by protecting their children from feeling they are in danger of being separated from them. To children, separation is the most threatening of all situations.

### **Don't Threaten a Child With Separation**

Parents sometimes threaten little children with "going away." It's true this often results in "good behavior," since the possibility of losing his parent is so upsetting to the child that he will do anything

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to avoid it. But these threats may, at the same time, produce such anxiety that the child believes that his parent will disappear, and, at any time. It may make the child compulsively good, afraid to do anything he's not absolutely sure will please his parents. A bad act, he thinks, might cause his parents to leave him forever.

A girl of 5, whose mother suddenly had to go to the hospital, connected this event to her own "badness." She thought she was responsible for her mother's illness. She became shy and timid and lost her spontaneity in a constant effort to be a "good girl."

### **To Sum It Up**

Because children do not have a real understanding of cause and effect, they may become confused and think they caused the parent to leave. It may be necessary to explain the reason for your departure several times. Reassure the child that this situation is not her fault.

If your child does regress to outgrown behavior, you may need to adjust your expectations and standards somewhat. Try to have a consistent routine. Pay particular attention to basic needs such as sleep, meals and exercise.

Your child needs to feel you are dependable--that he can count on you to do as you say you will do. Use the separation times to build trust between you and your preschooler.

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