

# FOCUS

## On Early Childhood Mental Health



**Pennsylvania Key**  
*Early Childhood Mental  
Health Consultation  
Project*  
717-213-2063  
[micwal@berksiu.org](mailto:micwal@berksiu.org)

## *Separation Anxiety*

"Separation anxiety" is what young children experience when they don't want to be left alone without their most important caregiver (usually a parent). They often express their feelings by crying uncontrollably, withdrawing from others, throwing tantrums, etc. Not all young children experience separation anxiety, but many do. It usually begins when the child is 8-12 months old and subsides around the time the child is 2, although sometimes it can last longer.

### **What causes separation anxiety?**

A child grows and develops, he or she begins to understand that parents and caregivers are separate individuals; however, the child hasn't yet learned that when Mommy and Daddy leave they will come back. The anxiety many children experience is part of their normal emotional development.

### **Tips for parents on helping a child who is experiencing separation anxiety**

- Understand and accept that while a child's separation anxiety is a normal part of becoming independent, it often feels like the child is become more dependent.
- Practice at home by leaving the child alone in a room; when you return, say, "Mommy's back!"
- Talk at home about the new people (adults and children) he or she will learn to know at the new place.
- Whenever possible, don't leave the child when he or she is already tired or hungry.
- Don't act upset or make a fuss when you leave.
- Create a little ritual you use every time you leave; for example, a hug and a kiss, and a calm and reassuring reminder of when you'll come back.
- Have someone distract the child with a toy, book or game—something you know the child really likes.
- Always say goodbye and don't sneak out when the child isn't looking; this can cause the child to mistrust what you say or do.
- Even if you hear the child crying, don't come back after you've left.
- Keep your promises about when you'll return so your child can develop confidence and trust.
- Remember that most of the time the tears stop soon after you leave, so you don't need to feel guilty.
- Take the time at home to nurture your relationship with your child.

*"Separation Anxiety," Parenting Corner Q & A, American Academy of Pediatrics, [www.aap.org/publiced/BK0\\_SeparationAnxiety.htm](http://www.aap.org/publiced/BK0_SeparationAnxiety.htm).  
More tips available from [http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/separation\\_anxiety.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/separation_anxiety.html)*