



School Counsellor Newsletter

Edition 36

Anxiety: Supporting a child with separation anxiety

Anxiety can present itself in many different ways and for some children it is most significant when they are away from their families or their familiar environments. For example, you may know a child who does not display anxious behaviours whenever you see him at school or when he visits your house and yet he may find sleeping over at your house extremely stressful and daunting. Or you may observe a child who is very confident in one environment, for example at school, but then quite nervous and uncertain when he goes on a school trip to a place he has not been before. This is very normal, because anxiety is normal. This newsletter, the third in a series on anxiety, will focus specifically on separation anxiety, sharing some information as to why it happens and how you can support a child when he experiences this.

Separation anxiety happens because a child is worried or feels unsafe in some way. Some common causes include a change in their environment or circumstances such as moving house or school, a loved family member or pet passing away, a friend moving to live in another city or country or parents separating. Some children simply worry that when they are away from their family something terrible might happen to them. The impact of these changes or worries can lead to a child refusing to be far away from you, including not wanting to go to school or becoming upset if their parents are out for the evening. This can lead to difficulty sleeping, feeling sick, such as an upset stomach or headache, and being 'clingy' at times.

Here are some suggestions as to how you can support a child with separation anxiety:

- Create a consistent routine for your child as much as possible so there is less fear of the unknown. Stick to the routine so your child knows there are boundaries and limits and these will not change even though he may be anxious. For example, if your child finds it hard to say goodbye to you at school drop off, aim to leave at a similar time each day, drop off at the same spot as much as possible, give him reassurance and praise as he gets out of the car and then leave promptly. If the routine is going to change, let your child know so you can discuss this and prepare for it.
- Prepare for activities your child finds challenging: acknowledge it is hard for your child, talk about what is hard and make a plan for the activity including giving your child some choice or control. For example, if your child does not like you going out in the evening let him know you will make time to be with him before you go out, arrange for the babysitter to arrive earlier so they can settle in with him if that helps, it can also be helpful if they are familiar with the babysitter, and let him know you will check on him when you get home but you are definitely going to go out. As part of this plan your child might get to choose what you do together before you head out or what activity he can do with the babysitter.
- Be calm yourself. It is understandable that you may be feeling anxious as you know your child is finding things challenging and upsetting. Be consistent and calm, maintain limits and boundaries and support your child to participate in all activities even if he finds it hard. As you leave your child, do it quickly and in a low key manner, and practise it as often as possible even if you only leave for short periods of time. Avoiding separation and activities he finds challenging will only reinforce the anxiety in the long term. Praise him for coping and any small successes even if things are still hard - it will be a step-by-step process.
- Some final little things to try: write notes of encouragement to put in your child's lunchbox for school or with his pyjamas for a sleepover; make fun games involving exercise or time outside a regular routine to alleviate or prevent the impact of stress; keep things light and enjoy humour wherever possible. When you know a particularly challenging event might be coming up, like moving house or changing school, prepare your child by ensuring that they are eating well, getting enough sleep and taking part in relaxation activities such as mindfulness. Always be kind to yourself, as this is challenging for you as well.

Some of these suggestions may be difficult to carry out due to the extent of a child's separation anxiety, so please do make contact if it would be helpful to discuss this further.



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Jenelle is a Registered Provisional Member with NZAC (New Zealand Association of Counsellors).

If you wish to discuss the services the School Counsellor can provide, please see your son's homeroom teacher or Amos Pilgrim:

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