

# Easing the Separation Process for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

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Seven-month-old Max sits on his mother's lap while she talks with Alice, Max's primary caregiver. She says goodbye, kisses Max, and hands him to Alice. Max bursts into tears. "Mommy will be back after your nap," Alice tells him.

They sit on the floor to look at Max's family pictures. "Oh, look, here's Mommy and Sandy, your dog. Woof-woof!" As Max begins to calm, Alice cuddles him and reads him his favorite book.

IT'S A COMMON SIGHT, one we see every day in child care centers and family child care homes. Families and children say goodbye in the morning and then say hello at the end of the day—a repeated demonstration that separation and attachment are two sides of the same coin; a daily declaration of love.

## The power of attachment

Attachment and separation are the stuff of which life is made. Feelings about saying goodbye aren't restricted to child care situations. Separating from someone we love and care about is a lifelong experience that affects every one of us many times during the course of our lives. How many separation experiences has each of us had!

We begin life with a separation from our nine-month inner home. We leave home to go to school or camp or college. We graduate and leave again. We move to a new home, take a new job, go on a vacation trip. Some get married, some get divorced, and usually we all suffer the ultimate separation, the death of a loved one. The task of adjustment to these separations challenges us at every stage of life, from infancy on. Characteristic of all these experiences is leaving the familiar and heading into the unknown. Where would we be without the strength of our attachments?

The bonds between family and child promote resilience, self-regulation, and a positive sense of self. Because firm ties to another help us develop autonomy and the belief that we are lovable, it is critical to encourage and value strong attachments not only between children and parents, but also between teachers and the infants and toddlers they care for (Honig 2002a). If attachment is misunderstood as dependence, it may be wrongly discouraged.

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**Infants' and toddlers' trusting attachments to their teachers are critical in helping them cope with the stress of separation.**



I saw an example of this recently. A director admonished a teacher for holding a two-year-old on her lap several times during the morning because “you are spoiling and babying the child.”

### **Attachment fosters children’s development**

We know a lot about attachment. According to Eliot (2000), babies are programmed to grow attached to their parents or primary caregivers due to development in their brain’s frontal lobe. The attachment relationship “seems to be responsible for modulating stress. Attachment and brain development are a two-way street” (p. 311). Quality child care, in Eliot’s view, is key in protecting babies’ brains and emotional development.

In quality child care infants’ and toddlers’ trusting attachments to their teachers are critical in helping them cope with the stress of separation. Since stress can cause elevated levels of the hormone cortisol, a potential hazard to the brain, and since attachment seems to offer protection, we have another powerful reason to nurture and treasure our attachments with others.

Thanks to the seminal work of Ainsworth and Wittig (1969); Bowlby (1969); Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975), and a more recent explication by Honig (2002b), we understand that the young child’s slow developmental journey leads to the creation of a person who is both attached to the parent yet separate—a paradox: bound yet free, close yet apart. This human dilemma has been defined as a

“developmental necessity” (Resch 1977).

According to the theory of Margaret Mahler (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman 1975), children and their parents travel together through a series of developmental phases that enable the children, at around age three, to become certain that “I’m me and no one else.” This process becomes partially observable, for example, around seven to nine months, when a baby may become fussy about going to anyone other than a parent. This can be hard on visiting grandparents, other relatives, or caregivers, and embarrassing to parents. However, this is really a baby’s way of saying to the adult, “I love you, and I don’t want to be messing around with anyone else.” Baby and parent hopefully withstand this mild storm and then head together into toddlerhood, where the emotional weather gets a bit more turbulent.

It's exciting when a just-walking child, lured by enchanting sights and sounds, wanders off without a backward glance. But somewhere around 18 to 24 months, according to Mahler's theory, this runabout toddler becomes aware of her own vulnerability: "Hey, wait a minute. I'm too little to be away from you too long; I can't take care of myself. I need you!" So parents, who have figured out how to give the toddler some rein without the bit, suddenly find this young wanderer clinging to their legs or climbing into their lap for what Mahler calls "emotional refueling."

It's at this point that parents as well as teachers must cope with toddlers' being pulled in two directions at once. One moment they strike out on their own ("I do it myself!"); then moments later they plop down in a lap, seeking security and safety. By negotiating this tempestuous time, parents and toddlers not only become separate from one another, but as long as the parent is a reliable, loving, secure base, the two also become more securely joined.

### The internal parent

**In some groups children develop attachments to several caregivers.**



By the time most babies become toddlers, they are beginning to be able to hold in their minds an internal image of their attachment person or persons. My colleague Virginia Casper (pers. comm. 2005) calls this a "love memory." Imagine a grandmother at an airport bidding her grandson goodbye. She can draw on the love memory of her grandson to alleviate the pain of parting, and he can do the same by thinking about her. Toddlers also try to rely on love memories for comfort, especially at the moment of separation. However, at a time of great stress, a still fragile love memory may not be available. As this dear memory image recedes, the toddler could feel as though the person has disappeared.

Here is an example. I was standing next to a two-year-old and his father, waiting for an elevator. When the elevator door opened, the father stepped in, assuming the child was following. But the door shut, leaving the child with me, a stranger. Screaming, the toddler threw himself on the floor. To him, his father had been swallowed alive. My assurance that "he's coming right back" did no good. Finally the elevator returned, miraculously spitting out his worried father and reuniting him with the terrified child. This example sheds light on the fragility of that inner image and why infants and toddlers need time and sensitivity to cope with the stress of separation.



## Variations in attachment

While Mahler's theory of developmental phases is one among others, in your work you may see some aspects of the behaviors she describes. Although attachment to a secure base and the reaction to strangers are universal (Eliot 2000), there are variations on the theme. In some groups children develop attachments to several caregivers. For example, perhaps you have seen a toddler arrive at her familiar early care setting with an aunt and a cousin, as well as a grandparent in tow, and then bid goodbye to them all. While this may lessen the stress of separating within the familiar community group, it may make it difficult for the child to go to a stranger (Gonzalez-Mena 2005). At the other extreme, there are families who do not risk forming attachments with their babies due to living conditions of dire poverty and widespread infant mortality (Rogoff 2003; Gonzalez-Mena 2005).

**Adults' experiences from their own childhood may influence their feelings about separation.**

Other factors come into play in the drama of attachment and separation. Consider temperament, which may influence the manner in which infants and toddlers react to separation (Kristal 2005). How adaptable is an infant to new situations? How easily soothed when upset? How intense is a toddler in expressing emotions? These temperamental factors put a stamp on the way a child faces the world. Adults as well come with assorted temperaments that affect how they separate from their children. A parent might be wary in saying goodbye, while the child might be easygoing.

How teachers regard a child's temperament is another consideration. Teachers may be influenced by their own cultural socialization goals. A recent study found that in China teachers view shy, sensitive children as socially and academically competent, while in North America teachers are likely to view shy, sensitive children as lonely and depressed (Carlson, Feng, & Harwood 2004).

In early care programs we need to remember that adults' experiences from their own childhood may influence their feelings about separation. A parent was very tense bringing her son to the classroom, because her own long-ago early childhood experience involved a punitive teacher. She wrote,

The pain of separation is not only from your child but from your own childhood. . . . The past lives on . . . the dangers that lurked in [my world] are simply nowhere to be found in [my son's]. I know that I can never get my childhood back, and still, when I enter his classroom, with its smell of milk and warm bodies, the adult veneer begins to crack. (Franks 1989)

Family circumstances—a new baby, a parent away from home for a period of time, a move to a new home, the death of a pet, marital stress or violence—also affect how children react to separation. Even a change in the family constellation can affect a child (Kristal 2005), as happened for a 23-month-old who had been secure in early care for over a year:

Amanda's father brought her to the center accompanied by her grandparents, freshly arrived from China. They were there to help her mother, who was about to give birth. Amanda was engrossed at the water table but became frantic as the three family members began to leave without saying goodbye. Her father held her for a long time while she sobbed. The abrupt departure, the new family arrangement, plus the impending birth affected Amanda's usual ability to separate.

### Children with special needs

Although children with special needs or disabilities are as attached to their parents as most children, they may experience a delay in the expression of their separation reactions (Foley 1986), and their cues may be subtle or difficult to read. A study of separation reactions in children with mild retardation, ages three to five years, with developmental ages one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half, revealed that the children did not give strong clues to their feelings (Kessler, Ablon, & Smith 1969). Their regressive behav-



ior was often attributed to the retardation itself, and their aimless running around to hyperactivity rather than separation reactions. The teachers encouraged the children's responses to separation by talking about where their mothers were, what the mothers were doing, and when they were coming back. When the teachers also helped parents recognize that their children's behavior reflected feelings of anxiety about separation, the mothers began to understand the depth of their children's attachment.

Children with special needs may be put on a school bus without due consideration for their feelings about separating from their families and connecting to new

teachers. In a program for two-year-olds with cerebral palsy, the teachers seldom saw the families because the children arrived by bus. One boy spent a lot of time crying, refusing the teacher's attention. Sensing that he missed his family, the teacher asked his mother to ride the bus with him and come into the classroom. Her short visits and

## Resources on Different Cultural Approaches to Childrearing

- Carlson, V.J., & R.L. Harwood. Dec 1999/ Jan 2000. Understanding and negotiating cultural differences concerning early developmental competence: The six-raisin solution. *Zero to Three*. Adapted version online: [www.zerotothree.org/vol20-3.html#six-solution](http://www.zerotothree.org/vol20-3.html#six-solution).
- Gonzalez-Mena, J. 2005. Attachment and separation. In *Diversity in early care and education*, 4th ed., 79–91. New York: McGraw-Hill.
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time on the bus gave her son the security he needed to sustain the separation. The staff were able to help him by reflecting his feelings, saying, “I know you miss your mom, but you’ll see her soon when the bus takes you home after school.”

In another early intervention program, teachers encouraged families to use a predictable daily ritual for saying goodbye—for example, a kiss, a hug, and a high-five, always in the same order. Teachers and families sent a “communication book” back and forth daily, between center and home, in which each wrote facts important for the other to know.



### **The effects of culture**

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Cultural preferences may influence how some separations take place. In a small study of mothers’ preferences in toddler attachment behaviors, Anglo mothers disliked clinginess and preferred their children playing at a distance. Puerto Rican mothers, on the other hand, preferred their toddlers to sit close by and display respectfulness (Harwood & Miller 1991). As teachers, we need to understand the importance of cultural beliefs and what separation means to families of diverse cultures.

Another study that included a small group of young Korean American children revealed that the children were taught by their families that it is a

virtue to hide their feelings and to show deference to teachers (Chu 1978). Their teachers were not Korean American, so we must wonder what the teachers thought. Did they think the children didn’t miss their families because they didn’t cry? Or did the teachers think that the children’s self-control was a sign of precocious maturity? Did the teachers know that Korean culture values undemonstrative behavior?

The challenge for early care teachers is to understand that a family’s point of view about raising their child is valid for that family as long as it does no harm. There is abundant information to help teachers understand the variety of familial and cultural beliefs that exist (see “Resources on Different Cultural Approaches to Childrearing”). However, we can learn from families themselves, if we listen well and do not rush to judge practices that are different from our own. It is more respectful to say “Please tell me how you [bathe/feed/give guidance to/toilet train] your child” than to share our ideas of the “correct” way. We need to listen and learn, even if what we hear makes us uncomfortable (such as “I put her on the potty starting at three months”). While an accepting attitude takes considerable practice and requires the support of others, it can forge strong teacher-family relationships.

### **A curriculum of trust**

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By developing a curriculum of trust, teachers can help infants and toddlers, when away from their families in early care, to achieve well-being and comfort as well as the ability to learn (see “Five Tips for Creating a Curriculum of Trust”). Recognition that separation reactions in young children can be expected and are valid provides an unparalleled contribution to children’s development. It is you—early care teachers—

## Five Tips for Creating a Curriculum of Trust

**1. Use a primary caregiving system** in which each early care teacher forms a miniature family group of three or four children, focusing on routines like feeding, changing, napping, and playing (Baker & Manfredi/Petitt 2004). Although the caregiver-child relationship is close, it is not exclusive. The best system relies on the cooperation and mutual helpfulness of the caregiving team. If a teacher is comforting a baby and another child from her primary group requires attention, the teacher needs to know that another staff member will pitch in to help.

The primary caregiver provides a secure base for the child and the family. The relationship eases a child's anxiety and reassures the family not only during the transition from home to center care, but throughout the whole of the child's stay. Primary caregiving has been described as being "best for everyone involved" (Bernhardt 2000, 74).

**2. Institute a gradual easing into the program** for the family and child together. A slow entry process gives the child time to adjust, the parent time to know the early care teacher, and the teacher time to know the child and family. Many programs invite a family member and the child to stay only a short time on the child's first day and then increase the time each day for two or three days, until the adult says, "Goodbye, I'll be back later," and the teacher supports the separation.

Programs must explain the purpose of the plan for gradual adjustment to families before they enter. An easing-in process isn't simple when a parent must go to work, but trying to facilitate it is worth the effort. The payback is a happy child and a trusting parent.

**3. Be there to support the everyday goodbyes.** Hugging, kissing, crying, waving at the window or door, saying "I love you"—all allow feelings to come out in the open. Emphasizing that Mom or Dad or Grandma will be back is very important, because young children are not always sure that is so. Since separation is a central concern in early childhood, teacher support may be required throughout the year. When teachers form a secure base with children, children are able to explore and learn.

Research shows that the quality of early relationships with teachers is an important predictor of children's future social relations with peers and their later school satisfaction and achievement (Howes & Ritchie 2002). Teachers and caregivers are important people.

**4. Anticipate and be prepared for regressions or shifts** in behavior during a child's first weeks in the program. For example, a toddler who is toilet trained may lose control during the separation period. An easygoing baby may cling like Velcro to the parent. One child may increase thumb sucking, another may bite or hit occasionally, while others may resist going to sleep, refuse to eat, have frequent tantrums, or begin waking at night at home. Knowing that these behaviors may occur enables teachers to be accepting when a child hits. Saying "He doesn't like it when you hit, so let's find another toy for you" establishes the child's trust in a teacher who is there to help.

**5. Offer children tangible reminders of their parents,** such as photographs or a favorite toy or blanket. Provide books about hello and goodbye, play peekaboo games (Szamreta 2003), use important words from a child's home language, and ensure consistent classroom routines.

who can show children and families that participation in a quality early care and education program is a unique opportunity for children's growth. When teachers and caregivers ease the separation process by building trust, they help children build competence, confidence, and self-assurance.

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