

FEATURE

Helping children to cope with anxiety of separation before first day at school

Probably one of the biggest developments in any young child's life is the day they start school. Yet for many, the anxiety of being separated from parents means this is a traumatic time for all involved. **Stacey Turner**, a former teacher, children's author and expert in separation anxiety, looks at how to cope with this experience in the first of a two-part feature.

Separation anxiety is anxiety provoked in a young child by separation, or the threat of separation, from the child's mother or main carer

However, it is often a normal stage of childhood development from approximately eight months (sometimes younger, as was our

case with our daughter) to five years, often older. It can also reappear at times of change and stress.

It is vital for the health and well-being of your child to recognise separation anxiety, as it is a form of anxiety requiring help and support (see panel for the main signs).



Anxiety is an emotion with the sole purpose of helping us deal with the world around us.

It is important to put the appropriate support and care in place to:

- 1) Establish and form healthy attachments to people and places;
- 2) Prevent naughty behaviour being misunderstood or a child labelled as attention-seeking;
- 3) Put help and support in place to minimise distress within the family and at nursery/school;

4) Teach a child how to reframe their thinking to overcome the current negative thought patterns. This then paves the way for a happier and clearer way forward, as the child becomes confident using these learnt skills;

5) Build confidence, trust and resilience within a child to happily and confidently move forward.

It's crucial to understand why settling your child in is vital and healthy for not only your child,

but also for the whole family.

Of course, each child is different and even before we begin, we must take into account the hesitations and possible anxiety of the parents. You know your child better than anyone else and now you have to hand your precious little one over to school.

Mix this all in together and you get a bowl full of anxious thinking, feelings and behaviours as a result. So where do we start? From the beginning!



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We look forward to hearing from you!



FEATURE



Stacey Turner has spent many years helping overcome separation anxiety. Pictures: STEPHANIE BELTON

While each child and family are different, fundamentally the patterns of anxious thinking, physical and behavioural symptoms all appear in a similar way.

We can take this with considerations of the child and family in order to create a plan of alternative solutions to ensure a



smoother transition for settling in at school.

Let's face it, anxiety and hesitations start creeping in when you filled out that application form way back when suddenly it's the summer holidays and your child is starting in September!

Some of you have had and are still having a rocky journey and you may still be navigating trying to get into your preferred school.

Did you know anxiety is an

emotion? An emotion is a temporary, yet instinctive and intuitive state of mind that affects our bodies, minds and how we behave. The sole purpose of emotions is to help us deal with the world around us. There are hundreds of emotions, so if you or your little one are feeling anxious, chances are, the fear and worry are tagging along too.

Did you know thoughts and feelings are interlinked, therefore

Spotting the signs of separation anxiety

Signs of separation anxiety include:

- being very clingy, retreating to a corner or hiding under furniture;
- having difficulty settling back to a calm state;
- finding it distressing to be in their own bedroom and settle themselves to sleep, or being reluctant to go to sleep (when a child closes their eyes, you disappear and this can stimulate nightmares);
- wetting or soiling the bed, experiencing toileting

- accidents in the day;
- refusing to go to school (even if your child actually likes school and their friends);
- complaining of physical sickness such as a stomach-ache just before or at the time of separation;
- fearing something will happen to a loved one, or worrying that they may be permanently separated from you;
- having little appetite or picking at and complaining about food.

behaviour is the result! Dealing with this as an adult, let alone as a small child who doesn't even know what these emotions, thoughts and feelings are. They are relying on you and to guide them.

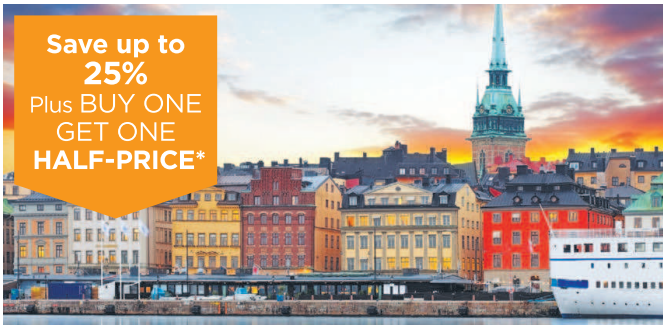
In general, this is a difficult time and as with any change, it takes adjustment for the family. It's not just about navigating drop off, pick or childcare arrangements, there's encouraging friendships and getting to know a whole new world of school.

Finally, there's the handover of your child to your child's teacher(s) and that is often the bit that can cause the most distress.

So, what do you do? It starts by acknowledging and showing your little one that it's OK to feel the way they do, and we'll be looking at this in more detail in the second part of this feature.

Do you have a story on separation anxiety and how it affected your family? We would like to invite you to write to us and share your experiences with a chance to feature in the paper for the second part of this feature, which will focus on settling in at school and overcoming separation anxiety. If you would like to speak to us, please email the newsdesk on hertsad@archant.co.uk before the end of August.

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