Positive separations

Separating from loved ones can be distressing

Early childhood services and schools are supportive environments where children have many opportunities to grow and learn through their positive experiences. However, when children are separated from their parents and carers they can feel distressed. This is a common response from about six months of age and can continue into the early years. Some school children may also experience some separation distress.

Children may show their distress in different ways. Whereas some may be visibly upset, others may have physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea or tummy aches. Other children may show their distress by appearing nervous, being restless, clingy, or by being quiet and withdrawn.

Distress from separating from their parents or carers is a common feeling for many children when they first go to an early childhood service or start school. They may be feeling a little unsure in a new setting with new people. Children's distress is generally short-lived and they are quite often happily playing within a short time of their parents or carers leaving. Over times, children learn to feel safe in their new surroundings and gradually experience less separation distress.

Children vary in their levels of emotional sensitivity. Some children worry about lots of things, while others are more carefree. Most are somewhere in between. Separating from parents and carers can be distressing for children, and can result in behaviours that are hard to manage - like screaming, tantrums or refusal.

Understanding and managing separation distress is the first step involved in helping a young child to feel comfortable to be apart from their parent or caregiver. Helping children to cope with separation distress is best achieved when parents or carers and early childhood services and schools work together to create positive separation experiences for children.

See also:

Positive separations: Further resources