



## MACARTHUR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL CLINIC



## Beginning Kindergarten?

### How to manage separation anxiety

About 4 per cent of primary school age children experience excessive separation anxiety when separated from the parent or primary care giver. These children persistently worry about being forgotten, or the parent being harmed or not returning.

*Separation anxiety is part of normal childhood development.* It begins around six months of age and typically ends by the time children begin kindergarten or preschool. A healthy level of separation anxiety indicates the development of a close bond and attachment to the primary caregiver.

### TIPS FOR EASING SEPARATION ANXIETY

- Take advantage of orientation sessions offered by the school. This will provide your child with the opportunity to become more familiar with the physical space, staff, routines and other children. It will also provide children who have not previously been in any form of care to become used to the idea that you will come back to collect them.
- Acknowledge your own level of anxiety privately and model a sense of confidence and calm to your child. Children are very perceptive and will sense how you feel.
- Children will generally be less fearful when they know what to expect. In the week or so leading up to starting, casually talk to your child about;
  - ❖ What he/she will be doing during their time at kindergarten?
  - ❖ the teachers,
  - ❖ the other children,
  - ❖ Their uniform, lunch box and school bag.
- Read picture books about starting school together and take your child shopping for a lunch box etc, as these types of interactions will help to create positive associations with going to school and a bridge between home and school.
- If your child expresses fears or concerns about particular parts of the transition, talk through some practical solutions so that they feel more equipped for dealing with their concern (this is really for preschoolers and older children). For example, talking through simple strategies for negotiating

social situations, like asking the other child if she can have a turn when they are finished with a ball or glue stick. It can help to model the words to say, e.g. "Can you please pass it to me to have a turn when you are finished?," as well as by role playing (as appropriate) when you and your child are together.

- Be organised and allow time so you can start the day calmly.
- Allow your child to take a small family photo to school with them. Or let them pick something special from your handbag to keep with them for the day. If you are familiar with the picture book *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn, you might like to make your own kissing hands necklace.
- When it comes to drop off time;
  - ❖ Take advantage of the opportunity (if it is offered) to go into the classroom to settle your child to an activity.
  - ❖ When it is time to go, do not tell your child that you are leaving and then hang around as this has the potential to prolong the period of anxiety for your child.
  - ❖ Resist the urge to sneak away without saying goodbye. Keep a happy and calm facial expression.
  - ❖ Say goodbye and tell your child when you will be back to pick them up. Try to use words such as, "I will be back after your afternoon reading time". Ensure they know where you will pick them up from.
  - ❖ Resist the urge to hover outside and peek through windows.
  - ❖ If you are concerned (and it is appropriate), call the school a short time later to ask if your child has settled.
  - ❖ Children will pick up on your cues if you are feeling nervous so try to be mindful of what you communicate about your own emotions.
- Help your child to make connections with other children by inviting children that your child enjoys spending time with to play out-of-school hours.
- For children experiencing tears and anxiety at drop off time, consider is it a general problem of anxiety at school or more the case of difficulty separating from Mum (or Dad)? If separation from one parent is the problem then consider making short term arrangements for the other parent to assume drop off responsibility. A short period with an alternative drop off person can work to break the anxiety cycle for some children.
- Keep informed about classroom routines, events and happenings by reading any newsletters or other communication available. Use this information to talk to your child about the fun things they have been (or will be) doing in class.
- Set up a reward chart in which your child works towards something special, putting a sticker on each day he/she separates from you without too much trouble.

