

MANAGING SEPARATION ANXIETY IN INFANT CARE



One of the main goals in the infant program is to establish a sense of trust between one primary care staff and a maximum of three infants. Consequently, the way separation anxiety is handled is very important. A strong emotional bond is essential for early learning.

What's more, newcomer infants have been through many adjustments in their young lives. This may be the first time the parent(s) and child will be separated. Creating healthy attachments and forming a strong emotional bond between one caregiver and an infant will help you support the newcomer infants in your care and will allow them to cope with separation anxiety more easily.

Research has shown that healthy attachments are formed when caregivers:

- Are consistently available.
- Are sensitive and receptive to a child's signals.
- Are honest in their interactions.

Sometimes children cry, feel lost or react strongly when their parents first leave. This separation anxiety is normal—especially if it's a child's first time in group care. Gradual separation is an important step in helping infants and parents through this difficult time. For more information on gradual separation, see [A Parent's Guide to Gradual Separation](#) (Now available in over 40 languages!)

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To achieve healthy attachments with the infants in your care:

- Pay attention – Focus on the infant. Talk to them, show them the toys and play with them. Learn to recognize each infant's signs of distress.
- Be consistent – Acknowledge the infant's feelings. Consistently responding to an infant's need for comfort creates a sense of security in the child. Do not let an infant cry for an extended period. If you cannot attend to them immediately, acknowledge the infant's need by making eye contact and telling them that you know they need you and you'll be there as soon as you can.
- Be sensitive – Let the child know that you're aware of their distress and respond to it appropriately by providing comfort.
- Be accepting – Accept rather than judge or discount a child's emotional distress and discomfort.
- Provide comfort – Soothe and comfort the child when they're upset. Contact the parent if the infant cries continually and cannot be comforted.
- Be honest – Start to build trust and develop an attachment with the infant by reassuring them. For example, you could say: "I know you miss your mommy, but she will come back at lunch time."

Here are some helpful tips for responding to an infant who is upset when a parent leaves:

- Casually talk to the parent about their child. Tell them about your program and develop a plan for gradual separation. This helps the infant to see staff as safe and trustworthy.
- Validate the infant's emotions: "You're sad because mommy had to leave."
- Give hugs and try to interest them in a favourite toy.
- Engage the child in their favourite activity.
- Play peek-a-boo games.
- Use puppets and stuffed toys to play goodbye games.
- Use sensory activities such as finger painting over laminated placemats so that the pictures appear and disappear as the infant smears the paint.
- Look at board books with the infant.
- Play hide-and-seek games with infants who are mobile.

Visit cmascanada.ca for more resources to support your work with newcomer families



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