

## Making goodbyes easier

There is no real wonder as to why children object when saying goodbye. For the most part, they would much prefer to stay with their primary caregiver and remain at home with their favourite creature comforts, even if they like the place and people they will be staying with. Nonetheless, the reality of today's parenting world means that parents are having to drop their children off and say goodbye on a more regular basis than ever to make way for other priorities including, but not limited to, working. Saying goodbye can be a wrench for all involved, and if drop offs do not go smoothly, it can breed a range of emotions that can set one's day off on the wrong foot. This article will address possible ways to overcome such problems and aim to establish a new normal for saying goodbye.

### ***Attachment style***

Attachment is the term used to describe the bond established between a child and their primary caregiver/s. In all, there have been four types of attachment styles identified – secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant (although the titles given to each can vary depending on the theorist). Unsurprisingly, the preferable attachment style is that of a child who is securely attached. Typical of this child is the ability to demonstrate trust in their primary caregiver. They understand that such a person will be there for them in times of need, acting as their emotional rock that keeps things rational as well as comforting.

The securely attached child is one who is likely to grab the bull by the horns and venture off without someone in tow. They will be happy and excited to see their primary caregiver when they return to collect them and they will not become overwhelmed by emotion during the reunification process. For the securely attached child, getting dropped off is just as much a part of their day as getting collected. It is not to say that this child will not experience some emotions during separation, but they will demonstrate enough trust in secondary caregivers to look after their needs and be ready to play and learn with less encouragement than those with less secure attachments.

Just because some children are not outgoing does not mean that they are not securely attached. Instead, these children will demonstrate their security in more reserved ways. For example, they will find a preferred place to play and keep themselves interested according to their own likes and preferences. They will allow those they are familiar with to support them if needed but will be happiest when left alone, unless they otherwise specify. It is important to understand that children with these types of traits are equally happy and adjusted. Their only difference is that they will not require the bells and whistles of peer interactions and social games; however, when and if they wish, they will install themselves in such experiences.

Regardless of personality style, children who are securely attached will be more readily able to regulate their emotions and manage the difficulties of saying good-bye. Children who are less securely attached will not. Instead, these children will be more likely governed by their emotions and create conflict that makes it difficult for everyone to transition into their daily activities. Saying goodbye and even hello when reunification occurs may not be met with smiles and ease.

For the above reason, it is important for adults to be aware of their own attachment style as this factor can greatly impact the ease with which a child will transition into someone else's care. For example, an adult with an anxious attachment style may function better when being reassured by the child that everything is alright, thus having a possible impact on a child's ability to interpret their own emotions. This concept will be further explained in the next section.

## ***Subject to change***

Children are always subject to change, thus meaning that their lives fluctuate as do their reactions to things. The birth of a new child, a change to their normal routine (i.e., one parent changes jobs and with it working hours), or not feeling well can be some of the reasons why even the most securely attached child experiences separation difficulties. Allowing the child time to readjust will be essential. Keeping other parts of their lives as normal as possible is recommended. Included in this suggestion is to keep rules and expectations as normal as possible. Making excuses for their new behaviours is not always helpful and can unmeaningfully create additional problems down the line. As such, know the household rules and stick to them, even when the heart tries to instil an excuse on behalf of the child (e.g., the child is only being physical because they are tired). To overcome any such instances where rules are broken, statements that get-to-the-point and leave no space for interpretation may be needed, for example, “I know you are tired, but it is not okay to hit me or anyone else”.

## ***Mirror neurons***

Mirror neurons are neurons that occur in the brain to help individuals determine not only what another person is doing but also the emotions and intentions behind an action. For example, mirror neurons help individuals (children included) to interpret what is going on around them and to draw a conclusion as to whether or not a situation is safe, friendly, welcoming, or potentially threatening. Young children are particularly reliant on their ability to read others as they do not necessarily have the vocabulary or skill to interpret a situation from an analytical standpoint. When children are unsure of a situation, for example being left in someone else’s care, they will automatically look to their primary caregiver for additional information about what is to come.

In instances where children pick up on a caregiver’s nerves or reservations (even if they are to do with feeling guilty about not being able to stay at home with the child), the child could easily interpret the situation as something more treacherous and become upset. Naturally, the idea of mirror neurons can work in the reverse, meaning that the moment a child becomes upset and an adult picks up on these emotions, then a cycle begins whereby the child and adult feed off each other’s emotional intensity with neither having the knowledge of how to appease the other.

For the above reason, it is important that the adult takes charge in these situations to override whatever emotion or response they might be having. An explanation of what this suggestion might look like is shown next.

## ***Practicing nonchalance***

When mental health professionals talk about parenting, they will often refer to different parenting styles. While, like attachment styles, there are those that can be more beneficial to the child’s learning and upbringing (i.e., an authoritative parenting style), there are other styles which, although at first glance seem less than desirable, can have a positive effect on a child. One such example lies with the parenting style known as the uninvolved parent.

Under normal circumstances, uninvolved parenting is not wholly encouraged due to its tendency to be neglectful and haphazard in responding to a child’s needs; however, there are elements of this parenting style, when used intentionally and mindfully, that can prove beneficial to the outcome of separation. Ambivalence is not a particularly desirable trait in a parent for the most part unless it is to do with a situation that does not require a lot of parenting involvement, for example, a child is trying to decide which clothes to wear. The absence of emotions when feeling ambivalent are, however, potentially beneficial when taking mirror neurons into account. For example, if a child is sensing a neutral set of emotions from the adult, then it is possible for the child to mimic those feelings, thus helping them to decrease the intensity of any emotions they might be

experiencing. For this reason, even if an adult may not be feeling an inner calm when saying goodbye, sending out emotional signals that indicate that there is nothing amiss can help create an improved sense of security and trust during the goodbye process.

### ***Decisive actions***

It may be typical, particularly for someone working in the early childhood or teaching professions, to suggest that “ripping the band-aid off” (a.k.a. leaving quickly) can be a helpful action when saying goodbye. The likely motivation behind such a suggestion is not to credit them with a lack of sensitivity but rather because they are typically skilled in identifying that the longer a child has to become emotional about saying their goodbyes, the harder it is for them to regulate their emotions and responses once a caregiver does leave. To put this scenario in other words, the longer anyone (adults included) has to grow their emotions, the harder it is to remain rational and manage oneself in a situation. For this reason alone, it can be worthwhile to consider the effects lingering might have on a child when they are objecting to the separation process.

If ripping the band-aid off is too much for the adult, there are other ways to approach this concept, for example, by putting a time limit on how long the adult stays. Advising the child of the adult’s intended actions (i.e., I will stay for five minutes) helps the child to have a look around and familiarise themselves with who and what is in their new environment before separation occurs. Naturally, if five minutes stretches into ten minutes or gives way to a child’s pleas for longer time, the child’s emotions will escalate and there will be little chance of the child settling when the possibility of gaining another five minutes with the parent looms in the near future.

### ***Making promises***

Another common action caregivers make is to promise children they will have a great day. Despite the fact that this type of statement is usually true, it is a platitude and built on assumptions that can be proven wrong (e.g., their best friend is off sick) – something which can end up backfiring and make the child all the more sceptical. Although children are likely to settle into their day and enjoy themselves, it is hard for them to imagine such an outcome when and if they are emotional. Children live in the here and now and find it hard to imagine what their life will look like beyond the next minute. In these moments, adopting reality statements in favour of platitudes can serve as a better aid, which might include something like, “You are upset because I have to go”. Despite the child’s initial reaction to a reality statement may involve tears and objections, the message will be absorbed and, behind the scenes, be filtering into the crevices of the brain that will help them to modulate their emotions and find acceptance in what will be. When delivered with decisive actions and a purposeful portion of neutral emotions (as described previously), children will soon learn to accept the reality of being dropped off and entrusted into someone else’s care.

### ***Questioning at pick up***

Another tip to support children to think little of being dropped off can be found at the opposite end of the day during collection. Curiosity and habit often lead adults to fire a plethora of questions to children about their day to confirm that they were indeed fine. While there is nothing innately wrong with showing interest in a child’s day, it does create secret and unintended opportunities to make the child recall their dislike of being dropped off. When asked if they had a good day, the child has the opportunity to say “no”, thus cementing their future argument when they are dropped off in the future. When collection times are made as organic as possible (i.e., asking a child what they were just learning about if you entered a classroom during learning time or focusing the conversation on what you will all be doing next), the child’s attention will be diverted away from thinking about separation times, thus helping to create an unspoken way of being that normalises the fact that separation is a part of your family’s everyday routine.

## ***Summing it up***

Saying goodbye is often not easy or fun. When tears and objections form the basis of goodbyes, emotions escalate and make it harder for everyone to face the reality that separation is a necessity. While there is no assured way of achieving happy drop offs all of the time, there are actions that can yield greater success. Children with a secure attachment typically better adjust to changes in their world. When adults know their own attachment style and work to overcome any emotions that may affect the separation process, they tend to better support their child's ability to adjust and emotionally regulate. In instances where adults suffer at the hands of their own anxieties, practicing nonchalance can help to create the impression that nothing is amiss. The transference of emotions plays an especially significant role and can determine separation success. Being aware of one's own body language and emotions can help replace any anxieties with a calm and collected aura that a child can interpret (through the use of mirror neurons) and adopt into their own way of being. Using language that specifies the agreement around drop off rituals (i.e., I will stay for five minutes) helps children to better accept the drop off process and anticipate the drop off routine. Avoiding platitudes that tell the child that they will have a good day helps to ensure that there are fewer opportunities for the child to create an argument against future drop offs. Cementing habits that draw attention away from drop off and collection routines helps the child focus on other aspects of their life, thus helping them to give less credence to the drop off process.

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