**Making separation easier**

When children separate from their parents it can be a tearful and challenging time for all involved. From the child’s perspective, it is little surprise that they prefer the parent to stick around. They are, after all, the people who children rely on and enjoy the company of most. When children tear up it is not necessarily indicative that they are sad or worried about being left in another’s company. Rather, they are expressing their preference of wanting to stay with their favourite people. Unlike adults, children do not make the connection that their emotions are a gateway to understanding their desires, wants and needs. Sad feelings are not interpreted as being left out and anxiety is not interpretable as being (possible) feelings of discomfort rising from things not going the way they would prefer. As such, adults must help children decipher what is happening to them and utilise different ideas to approach and overcome separation.

***Heart versus head***

As mentioned in the opening paragraph, children are run by their emotions, many of which are fueled by their desires, wants and needs. Furthermore, children’s lack of life experience makes being able to manage strong emotions difficult. For this reason, children react and respond in ways that align with what they want or hoped would happen rather than rationalising the reasons why things have to happen in a particular way, for example, being left at day care.

With the child’s inability to manage their emotions and see the world through a lens other than their own, they are ever-reliant on adults to make what feels like a shaky experience more stable. In order to stablise a child’s world, adults may need to be mindful of the impacts of their emotions and actions on the child. When a parent reacts to a child’s separation difficulties with their heart, they are likely to linger and hesitate, thus drawing out the experience. Anyone who has observed how a child’s emotions typically work will note that the longer a situation is drawn out the more a child’s emotions will build. When children’s emotions grow too big, children need to be supported to regulate. In these situations it is normal for parents to try to support the child to regulate; however, statistically, children’s emotions will continue to escalate the longer a parent remains in reach/sight. The usual reason for this reaction is that the child will be unable to think of anything other than to change the parent’s mind about leaving. For this reason, it is often best to allow another capable person to support the child during separation.

***Say what you mean and mean what you say***

Adults often fare better when they state clearly and precisely what is going to happen to children in regards to saying good-bye. This statement does not mean that children will suddenly leave a parent’s side without any future complaint. Nevertheless, when parents give clear guidance about how long they will stay and when they will leave, children are able to form an understanding of what to expect. When timeframes and good-bye routines are clear, children will be better equipped to settle into a new environment with fewer tears and develop a greater capacity to regulate their emotions. As such, parents and other adults involved in drop-offs may consider it beneficial to state how long they will stay before they leave, how many cuddles they will give and to which person they will hand the child over.

***Energy transference***

Energy makes up everything in this world. Therefore it begs to reason that emotions are fueled by energy. When anyone has an emotional reaction, it is easy to recognise that the energy surrounding the situation has the potential to make things better or worse. Typically, when one person’s emotions escalate (whether through worry, sadness, annoyance etc.) the energy surrounding that person will shift, thus meaning that person’s negative energy can impact and encroach on another’s energy.

Undoubtedly, the child who finds it difficult to say good-bye will already be experiencing negative energy which, if given the chance, can grow into more unwanted energy and/or transfer into the adult. As such, to avoid unhelpful energy transference, the adult saying good-bye needs to ensure that their energy does not have a chance to alter the child’s state of being or vice versa. The suggestion is therefore to remove oneself in a consistent and routine way before energy transference can occur.

NOTE: A good way of identifying if a child is potentially being affected by energy transference is if one parent can separate from the child more easily than the other parent. This comment, however, does not take into consideration the type of attachment parents have with their children or factors such as domestic violence, difficult co-parenting relationships etc., all of which can affect children’s ability to separate.

***Mixed messages***

Although this statement is an assumption, most parents leave their child/children in the care of only someone they trust. Displaying confidence in the person the child is being left with often sends the clear message that everything, despite the parent’s absence, will be okay. Telling a child that it will be okay rarely produces desired results – especially if the adult’s body language is not congruent with the words they are speaking. Therefore, adults fare better when their tone of voice, body language and words align.

***Building children’s resilience in their everyday lives***

Resilience is an important skill that is needed throughout life. It is best learnt in early childhood where matters that challenge one’s resilience levels are (typically) trivial. Learning to lose a game, having to wait to speak rather than talking over others, having to wait for a special occasion to get a gift etc. are all ways that help children build resilience. Without resilience children develop mindsets that can become focused on the negative and deem things too challenging. Additionally, their desire to give up and rely on others will increase. For more information on how to develop children’s emotional resilience see MJ’s article *Developing Children’s Emotional Resilience*.

***Time away – self-entertaining***

The benefits of self-entertaining cannot be underestimated. While it teaches a range of skills and bolsters attention spans (see MJ’s article titled *Teaching Boredom*), it helps children learn how to be away from adults and find comfort in their own company. Children who have unlimited adult attention are frequently those who are most challenged when separating. As such, allocating away time (not time out) each day can help children learn how to become less reliant on their favourite adults’ company.

***Summing it up***

Drops offs can be times which cause a lot of heartache. Children are rarely able to rationalise the need for separating from their parents. Instead their desires, needs and wants fuel an emotional reaction when saying good-bye. Adults who separate using their heads rather than their hearts often benefit their children more than the other way around. Energy transference can often make separation worse. Sending children clear messages about what will happen in a way that demonstrates the parent’s confidence in those they leave children with helps deliver the message that everything will be okay. Children who are resilient tend to fair better with separation, thus making it a skill that is considered beneficial to the child now and into the future. Teaching children how to be alone and enjoy their own company often enables children to spend time away from their parents. Well-established routines support children to know what to expect and how things will happen.

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