

Toward Sweeter Separations

An excerpt from *Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges*

Separation is a core challenge for almost every child at some time. We parents do the best we can to make it through these painful partings. We bribe our kids with promises of special treats. We lie down with them while they take hours to fall asleep, and then slide out of the bed, wasted from exhaustion. We cancel date nights at the expense of our relationships because we can't bear to see our little one's heart break. Yet these strategies don't help our children overcome their fears. The next bedtime, goodbye, or date night sparks the same old struggle.

Separation anxiety is understandable because our young children are wholly dependent upon us. We are their safe haven. Their lack of experience means that even though we're close by, simply walking into the bathroom and shutting the door can trigger feelings of fear. We know we'll return shortly, but early in their lives, they can't make that leap two minutes into the future.

Many parents try to shield their children from separation hurt, but it's as common as a skinned knee. Mommies and daddies talk on the phone. They run errands. They have to go off to work. Sometimes parents can't be present due to illness or the effects of stress. The entry into daycare or preschool can be a jolt. Many children must adjust to divorce, change schools, or move to a new community. Others face the death of a loved one.

Despite our best efforts, every child's sense of safety is rattled, sooner or later, by the hurt of separation.

Complications occur when a child doesn't have the support he needs to grieve until the hurt from separation is healed. Any leftover fears he carries are stored away, and they cause trouble down the line. Even an insignificant separation, like putting your child down for a nap, can bring up outsized emotion from the past. For instance, a few weeks after his grandfather dies, you might be shocked to find that your son has escaped his babysitter and is chasing your car down the street, afraid you'll die while you're at the grocery store.

When your child is deeply frightened by separation, it may be that a very early hurt is at the root of things. Take the birth experience, for example. Your child came to you ready to be welcomed, cradled, and protected by his loved ones at birth. Anything short of that can be a



Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges

shocking experience. When a newborn goes through a difficult birth, his system responds with alarm. And if he must be whisked away from his mother for any reason, his nervous system is fully aware that he's in big trouble, far from all he has known. Even one unwanted separation, large or small, can leave stored feelings that set your child up to be fearful when you leave. But rest assured that, however intense your child's separation fears might be, you can help him recover.

Over the years, a child will keep encountering new situations that trigger those earlier unhealed feelings. He might have a string of intense outbursts the week before he starts first grade, and again three years later when he's scheduled to take a trip to see his grandparents. Deep feelings recur until they've been entirely cleared out, but with each round a child makes good progress. Separation upsets are opportunities in disguise! As you Staylisten, painful feelings will pour out and your confidence will flow in. Your child's load of fear will lighten, and he'll enjoy his increased confidence. So will you.

TACKLING SEPARATION FEARS USING LISTENING TOOLS

The first step in moving towards confident separations is to plan for emotional ones. You're ready to be an agent of change when you've anticipated the upset that is surely coming.

Second, understand that your child's upsets reflect underlying fear, not a deliberate desire to ruin your plans. Think about where your child's fears might come from. If your son clings tightly to you at bedtime, consider what earlier separations he might be recalling. Has the daughter who won't participate in that gymnastics class she wanted so badly had difficulties in groups of children before? You may be able to identify a few of the hard times that could be contributing to your child's separation fears. But don't worry if you can't think of anything. He can shed his fears without either of you knowing their origin.

The third step in helping your child through separation struggles is to address your own fears and worries. As your child shows how threatened he feels, your own feelings can be triggered so that you become unsure of his safety, too! Your worries will be transmitted to him without a word.

Things will go better when you get the support you need to release those feelings. Remember how you felt leaving your crying child to get to work on time? Or how it felt moving your child from a crib to a "big kid" bed? Do you remember longing for your own mom? Your dad? Listening Partnerships work well for identifying and venting feelings from memories like these.

In the throes of a difficult separation, Setting Limits and Staylistening are your go-to tools. You'll want to let your child know ahead of time that a separation is coming up. He needs to

Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges

know where you are going, when you're coming back, and who will stay with him. If he begins crying at this news, Staylisten. He's using the healing process already.

When your child's fears go deep, start saying goodbye to him a whole hour before you must part. This allows you to be your child's anchor through his big feelings of grief. Simply propose to leave, then Staylisten. When his tears subside, say again, "Sweetheart, I'm going to go. I'll come back. I'll always come back." He will re-intensify his shedding of grief and fear with you right there. At some point, after he's done the crying he needs to do, he will be able to say goodbye, and enjoy his time with the safe adult you've chosen to be with him.

You are using Setting Limits and Staylistening, but drawing out the process, so that when you set the limit, there's no action on your part except Staylistening. This means there's plenty of time for his system to unload its burdens. He can focus on his feelings, rather than trying to comprehend a rapidly changing situation. The key healing factor is your confidence that he's OK as he cries. You'll need to keep remembering that he is not a heartbroken waif. He is a strong, fortunate child who is releasing stored feelings in the safest possible setting—with you by his side!

Here's what one mom was able to accomplish after getting some good Listening Time for herself:

My son is five years old. One of his biggest emotional projects is separation anxiety. I recently signed him up for a martial arts class after school on Mondays. This has turned out to be a prime time for working on separation. The first several classes did not go well. He participated some, but spent most of the classes flopped over in my lap. I spent most of the classes worrying about what others were thinking about us. I realized that I had to get some extra listening time, so I did. And it helped.

On Monday at class, I told him that while he was in the opening circle, I needed to leave the room for three minutes to go across the hall to ask a question in the office. We'd spent some nice time connecting after school, but my words elicited tears. "No, Mama. I don't want you to go. Let me come with you," he begged, clinging to me. After he calmed down, I mentioned again that I needed to go to the office, he was safe and I would be right back. Again, he cried. Occasionally, I nudged him off my lap, so that he could feel the separation a little more. Each time he calmed down, I again set the limit that I had to go, that he couldn't come with me, and that he had to stay in the room. We did this for most of the hour.

Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges

Halfway through, I was wondering if this was doing any good. But since I was still feeling OK, I decided that we could keep going.

The first major change I noticed was at bedtime. He mentioned that he was hungry, and that he wanted one raisin. Anytime he says this, I've figured out that he's missing me, and the closeness we used to have while breastfeeding at bedtime. I said, "You had a good dinner, and you can wait till morning to eat." He completely surprised me when he said, "OK. I'll have some water and it can fill the spot until breakfast." Wow! The surprises continued the next morning at school drop-off. I mentioned that I couldn't stay for second breakfast with the class. For the first time ever, he said, "Yay!" And when I said goodbye to him at the classroom, he forgot to give me a hug. I had to remind him! Usually the magic hug is a really big deal, but today he was confident and ready.

Setting limits at martial arts class, and the Staylistening that followed, made a big difference for him. I'm grateful that I've gotten myself the support I need to be able to support him. I'm even looking forward to next week's martial arts class, even if he doesn't participate.

[Get a copy of Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges](#)

Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges

