



## Anxiety in primary school children – Amanda Dudley

### Transcript

- 0:00:00 - 0:00:16 [Music]
- 0:00:16 - 0:00:23 The most common form of anxiety in preschool and early primary school-aged children is separation anxiety disorder.
- 0:00:24 - 0:00:30 This relates to children who feel very frightened when a close caregiver or attachment figure leaves them.
- 0:00:31 - 0:00:44 Very young children can lack the understanding of why their caregiver has left, and may have difficulty grasping the concept that the separation is actually temporary and that their caregiver will return.
- 0:00:44 - 0:01:01 Older children can often fear that something bad will happen to a loved one whilst they're separated. Whilst fear of separation is considered developmentally appropriate in toddler years, it becomes less common as children head towards preschool and early primary school years.
- 0:01:02 - 0:01:14 Children experiencing significant separation anxiety feel extremely anxious about being separated, they worry about the safety of their parents or their own safety and wellbeing
- 0:01:15 - 0:01:32 have reluctance or refusal to go places because of fear of separation, and can cry and protest, and don't tend to sleep alone or away from home. School camps and sleepovers can cause major distress and are often avoided.
- 0:01:33 - 0:01:43 These children may also complain of feeling sick at home or at school, spending a lot of time in the sick bay, or refuse to attend school altogether.
- 0:01:43 - 0:01:54 It's good to consider what elements of school life might make it extra challenging for a child with separation anxiety, and look to scaffold or help the child work up to that.
- 0:01:55 - 0:02:12 Many school systems have excellent transition programs with core elements including parent involvement, brief time at school, fun activities and routines, as well as opportunities to meet new teachers and other students who'll be in their class, and these are all great ideas.
- 0:02:13 - 0:02:20 Other key strategies will involve consideration of the process of arrival at school, as well as settling in activities.
- 0:02:21 - 0:02:29 It can be good to also consider how overwhelming school can be for any child, but especially for a very anxious child.
- 0:02:30 - 0:02:37 Giving children a little notice or a few minutes warning about what's about to happen helps to prepare them for change.
- 0:02:38 - 0:02:49 You might for example say to children "come on in everyone, sit down on the mat, we're going to read a book together and when we're finished I'll ask you to go up and sit on your chair"



- 0:02:49 - 0:02:55 This helps anxious children know what to expect and helps them to feel more settled.
- 0:02:56 - 0:03:05 In terms of seating, structured seating is common practice in classrooms and this definitely helps to reduce some of the uncertainty for children.
- 0:03:06 - 0:03:17 During floor time, you might want to consider having these children sit down the front, nice and close to you, so that you can keep a good eye on them and provide any additional support as needed.
- 0:03:18 - 0:03:34 Routines and structures help to develop confidence. Unstructured school time, such as recess and lunch, can often be tricky times for anxious children so it's helpful to keep a close eye on them especially during those early stages.
- 0:03:34 - 0:03:41 Knowing where to go, what to do, and who to play with, can be very anxiety provoking for some children.
- 0:03:41 - 0:03:52 Consider having some outside activities set up or available for children to engage in. This helps to reduce some worries and fears about not knowing what to do.
- 0:03:52 - 0:03:59 Having a quiet activity that they can do throughout the day, if they're feeling particularly upset, can also be helpful.
- 0:04:00 - 0:04:13 Having an additional teacher close by is also wise too. It can be hard when you've got a class to take and support a very distressed child at the same time. An extra person can be most helpful.
- 0:04:14 - 0:04:26 Use a step-by-step approach to school-based activities that might be anxiety provoking. For example, speaking and sharing ideas in front of others might need to be broken down into smaller steps.
- 0:04:26 - 0:04:35 First ask the child to answer a question when paired with a working partner, then in small groups, and building up to in front of the class.
- 0:04:36 - 0:04:50 This helps to scaffold the child and their confidence in their own ability. Keep in mind that there may be times for separation anxiety to reoccur even once they're familiar with the school and staff.
- 0:04:51 - 0:05:01 Any time away from school like holidays, long weekends, and even break due to illness, can be a potential trigger for reoccurrence.
- 0:05:01 - 0:05:08 These children might need a little extra preparation and support in returning after breaks than other children.
- 0:05:09 - 0:05:16 Thinking ahead about these times, and setting up opportunities for exposure prior to return, can be very beneficial.
- 0:05:17 - 0:05:28 This might include things like driving up to school, playing basketball in the school grounds, hearing from a teacher via email, and getting their uniform and bags ready.
- 0:05:29 - 0:05:35 Increased communication during this time is key, along with good transition planning.
- 0:05:35 - 0:05:42 [Music]