Separation Anxiety and How Teachers Can Deal With It

• Just in case you have a real screamer who can unnerve everyone and be a catalyst to chaos, that could potentially launch everyone into tears, have a room helper on hand for the 1st day of school, or for the 1st hour who can take the “criers”, and calm them down as she takes them for a walk and gets them away from the rest of the children, so you don’t have an entire class crying! Going for a 5-minute walk, or out to the playground helps.

• There will also be some who are border line anxious. If you look around they will have tears smarting their eyes or lips trembling and be valiantly trying to hold it together. You need to say: “Ya know what? It’s OK to miss your mommy. I miss my mommy too. She’s in Wisconsin. I’m so proud of all of you for being such big boys and girls and coming to hang out with me today. We are going to have so much fun! Later today we’re going to have Popsicles on the playground. Hey! Who wants to go earn their little dinosaur?” I’ve acknowledged their feelings and let them know that their feelings are OK. I’ve let them know that even a grown up feels that way. My students are amazed that I even have a mommy and even ask me about that. I give them something to look forward to later; I get their mind off mommy and on to our next thing-earning a dinosaur!

• Children really have no concept of time. We’ll have been in class 10 minutes and they’ll want to know “When do I get to go home?” “When do we get to play with the toys?” “When do we get to eat?” “When do we get to go outside.” If I’m going to get anything done, I have to address these very important things for them. I have 2 mini clocks on my white board. One has the time we go to lunch on it; the other has the time we get ready to go home. I tell my students that when the big clock on the wall looks like the little clocks on the board, that’s when it’s time to do those things.

• I also have our daily schedule on the board. I bought a magnetic plush frog and adorable colorful magnets that depict our specials: Computers, Library, Spanish etc. When we have those specials I put the magnet on the LEFT. When we don’t, the magnets sit on the RIGHT. It’s a way I teach left and right. As we move through our day, I move the stuffed frog. I also set timers. I tell children that when the timer rings we will be done with this and moving on to that. I try to find timers that have a pleasant ring to them. Knowing what comes next relieves anxiety.

• The first story I read to them is The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn. They can really identify with it. I have a plush raccoon puppet that I do a magic trick with. I’ve already grabbed their attention with the magic trick, and hold their attention by letting them pet my very soft puppet. I transition them into making a present for mommy. Little ones have a short attention span and may not want to do “work”, but they enjoy making “surprises” and “presents” for loved ones, especially mommy. This also relieves anxiety.
A welcome mat is also a fun 1\textsuperscript{st} day activity to do with your students. Buy a large flat one that students won’t trip over as they enter your room. Paint each student’s hand in a different color with permanent paint and press it on the mat. When it dries, have each child write their name with a black permanent marker on their print. This helps build community and will also dispel anxiety. “Let’s show mommy where your hand is on our mat.” They feel like they “belong” “I have friends here at school” dispels anxiety. They are welcome here.

One year I got a child over being anxious and into the room and away from mom, by giving him a job to do each morning. He just loved being my helper and putting the name cards on the tables. “Stevie, the kids will all be here any minute now; it’s time to get their names on the table. Thanks so much for being my helper and doing that for me.”

Another year I discovered that dad worked 2\textsuperscript{nd} shift. We tried having dad drop their son off instead of mom and there wasn’t the huge problem saying good-bye.

Children have anxiety for various reasons: 1. They need to feel safe at home, 2. They need to trust other people, 3. They need to trust that their parents will come back, 4. and they need to trust that they will be OK with their teacher.

All it took for one little boy to get over his anxiety one day, when nothing seemed to console him, was a quick phone call home to check on mom. I preaced it with: “We can only call mom TODAY to check on her, but would you like to borrow my phone and do that?” It worked like a charm. I worried that he’d want to do it every day, but when he asked the next day, I reminded him that I said he could do it just that once, and he seemed to be OK with it and went off to play.

When I shared with a mom that her son had so much anxiety about getting picked up and asked her if she could write him a little note that simply said: “Josh I’ll pick you up after school at 2:15 by your locker.” That’s all it took. He wore that little note like carrying a blanket.

Separation anxiety can also be triggered later because a child has become attached to you, and now you need a substitute. There’s controversy among teachers whether they should tell students if they know they are going to be absent. Again, I think “forewarned is prepared” especially if you have an anxious child you know might go into meltdown mode. I have a muffin box that one of my “butterflies” gave me. It’s filled with lollipops. The only time they get one is when I have a substitute. That already makes it a positive thing. I also have a special activity as a center that the children just love on substitute days like Play-doh or unifix cubes etc. I let my sub know in my notes as an FYI that ______ may go into a meltdown mode and to have them be their special helper.
To help your students with trust issues let them know that you care about them, that you love them and that they are safe in your classroom, at your school and with you. Constantly reassure them all day long. Make your classroom a safe and fun home-away-from home and you won’t have separation anxiety issues. You’ll hear from parents that their child loves school and can’t wait to come!

For more information on anxiety click on the links.
http://www2.massgeneral.org/schoolpsychiatry/info_separationanxiety.asp