What to say when your toddler cries and clings at drop-off

"My three-year-old cries and clings to me every morning at nursery drop-off. Do I stay, slip out, or go? What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Okay, okay, I'll stay five more minutes… Actually, I'll just slip out while she's playing."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I'm going to work now. I'll be back after snack time. Bye, I love you."

The cling at the nursery door is one of the hardest minutes of a parent's day. The instinct is to stay until the crying stops, or to slip away while your child is looking at something else. What the guidance describes is simpler, and kinder over a few weeks: a short goodbye, the same every morning, and a promise you keep.

What is known, and at what age

The NHS describes separation anxiety as common between six months and three years, and suggests building up from short separations with someone your child knows well. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises keeping the goodbye short and sweet, even when your child cries, because a long goodbye stretches the worry out. It suggests giving a return time your child can understand, such as "after nap time", keeping that promise, and not coming back early to visit, which can start the anxiety over again.

A study of 70 fifteen-month-olds starting child care in Germany found that their stress hormone levels rose in the first hour after their mothers left. Children's attachments stayed secure, or became secure, when their mothers spent more days settling them in. A gradual start, where the nursery allows one, is time well spent.

What the words do

Take 1 stays a little longer, then disappears, so the child learns that tears buy minutes and that a parent can vanish. Take 2 says where you are going, when you will be back in words a three-year-old can picture, and that you love them, and then you go. Say it the same way every morning. Be there when you said you would be.

If you live in two homes

If both parents do drop-offs, agree on one goodbye: the same words, the same hug or wave, the same way of saying when someone will be back. Mornings after a changeover can be harder, so expect more tears then, and tell the nursery which parent is collecting so your child hears one clear answer.

In the UK

If the tears go on for weeks, or your child seems unwell or very unhappy at home too, talk to your health visitor or GP and to your child's key person at nursery. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.