



ST MARY'S
COLLEGE

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Some helpful tips for encouraging a positive start to Kindergarten

Saying goodbye is never easy, especially on the first day of school. It is normal for a child to feel nervous, scared, sad or clingy. We know it can be distressing as parents and carers to observe these emotions in your child. Please be assured, however, that separation anxiety is normal and even expected.

We hope this information will provide some comfort and guidance for supporting your child as they start their journey at St Mary's College.

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a child's fear of being away from their parent or primary caregiver. Children are wired to be attached to their primary care giver; we call this secure attachment. Your child feels safe with you, so it is understandable that in a situation where they are being separated from you, they may feel threatened. Anxiety is your child's brain trying to keep them safe.

It may be mystifying, frustrating and distressing if your child experiences anxiety at school drop off. While you may be able to rationalise that they are safe, it is important to acknowledge that your child is not yet able to make those rationalisations as their brain is still developing. Starting school is one of the first opportunities that children have to face their anxieties, be brave and grow courage. The anxiety can feel big to some children, but together we can help them feel BIGGER.

How to help

Preparation

One of the main causes of separation anxiety in young children is the fear of the unknown. It might be helpful to familiarise your child with their new school as much as possible before they start. Some ideas for this may include:

- Visiting or touring the school with your child.
- Attending any orientation/pre-Kinder days your school offers.
- Attending Set Up For Success / Launch into Learning sessions, such as milangkani
- Driving in/around/past the school.
- Trying on the uniform.
- Answering any questions your child may have about starting school.

Routine

We know children thrive off routine, as this builds familiarity and predictability, which helps children feel safe. We also know that routine can help parents, as adults, feel calm and in control. It might be helpful as a family to establish what your routine will look like on school days, including the night before. Some ideas for establishing a good school routine may include:

- Making sure your child's school uniform is ready and set out the night before.
- Packing your child's bag and lunchbox as much as you can the night before.
- Deciding with your child what breakfast will be in the morning.
- Consistent bedtimes and awake times to help your child's body clock get into a routine.
- A visual schedule may help your child tick off what needs to be done in the morning before school.
- Allowing time for 'connection' together the night before and in the morning, i.e., doing an activity together like reading a book, brushing your teeth or having a song you sing together in the mornings etc.



Talk about the plan

It may be helpful to talk about the plan for the day in advance, so your child knows what to expect. For example, the night before you might talk to your child about what the morning is going to look like, or on the drive to school you might talk about what drop off is going to look like. When speaking to your child about the plan, it is important to remember the pick-up routine so your child knows the separation is temporary and you will always be reunited at the end of the school day. A simple “I can’t wait to see you and give you a big cuddle after Kinder today” may help your child feel less anxious about separating.



Transitional object / goodbye ritual

It may help with your child’s separation anxiety to decide on a transitional object or ritual before they start school. Plan and talk about it at home before your child starts school so they know what to expect. You can also provide your child with a small and discreet item (transitional object) on their first day of school. This item can help your child feel connected to you even when you are apart.

Some ideas for drop off rituals and/or transitional objects may include:

- A special handshake you do at drop off.
- A big ‘bear hug’ and kiss at drop off.
- A little felt object to keep in their pocket.
- A keyring with a family photo.
- A “lucky charm” to keep in their pocket.
- A letter or drawing in their lunchbox.



Establish safe people at school

The opposite of separation anxiety is relational safety. Help your child feel safe at school by establishing good connections with the staff at your child’s school. Let your child know that you trust their teachers will keep them safe and look after them while they are at school. It is important for children to know that if they have a worry, there is always someone at school that can help them.





Keep goodbyes brief

As distressing as saying goodbye may be, especially if your child is acting out their anxiety (crying, clinging, yelling), we know that once the parent and child have separated and said their goodbyes, children will usually calm quite quickly. When we prolong the goodbye to an anxious child, we are reinforcing the message that school is not safe and that there is something to be worried about.

Keeping goodbyes loving but brief will reinforce to your child that you know school is a safe place for them to be.

Looking after yourself as parents/caregivers

As the primary carer, your child looks to you to feel safe. If you feel stressed, your child will likely feel stressed as well. It is difficult to help regulate your child's emotions if you do not feel regulated yourself. It is important that parents do their best to look after themselves, focusing on basics like getting enough sleep, eating well, having supports in place and having 'me time' which can put you in the best position to then support your child through their challenges.

It is important to acknowledge that every child is their own unique person and that there is no one size fits all approach. Each child will have their own experience when starting school and this information may not be relevant to all families.

We hope you can take from this the bits that may suit you and your child as they start their journey through school.

Resources worth exploring

- The Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn



This information was compiled by the school's wellbeing coaches, Zoe Hannaford and Taylor Fletcher.

If you have any specific worries about your child, Zoe and Taylor are here to help. Please do not hesitate to reach out for a chat:

Zoe Hannaford: zhannaford@smc.tas.edu.au

Taylor Fletcher: tletcher@smc.tas.edu.au