

10 Tips for Dealing with Separation Anxiety

One of the most difficult things that we deal with in children's ministry is 'separation anxiety.' Separation anxiety is defined as; anxiety provoked in a young child by separation or the threat of separation from its mother or main caregiver. This is a normal phase that most, if not all, children go through before the age of three. During this time, children are struggling between a desire to strike out on their own and yet wanting to stay safe by a parent or caregiver's side.

Separation Anxiety is tough for all involved - the child, the parent and the teacher/ caregiver who the child is being left with, although it's often toughest on moms who naturally hate to hear their child upset.

The goal for children's ministry volunteers is for you, as mom, to be able to leave and enjoy the worship experience. That's the main reason Fort SAND exists, to support the preaching of the Word by providing a safe and caring environment where children can hear the gospel proclaimed while their parents are left to participate in the worship service without distractions. We want your child to be happy, both for his sake and yours.

Here are 10 tips for dealing with separation anxiety.

1. **Be Consistent** - This means attend regularly and make church a priority for your family. We all have busy schedules, but if church is a regular part of your family schedule your child will be expecting and even looking forward to it.
2. **Prepare for Friday throughout the week.** - Talk about church throughout the week. Sing the songs they he'll hear at church during family worship (these can be found on the Fort SAND website), read the stories he'll hear, etc. Go to bed Thursday night excited about getting to go to church in the morning. The more excited you are about church, the more excited your child will be.
3. **Arrive on time, well fed, dry and happy.** - Friday mornings are often stressful for the whole family. Plan ahead to make sure you're on time so your child doesn't feel your stress, assure they've eaten, have a dry diaper/ nappy and all other needs are met. Bring your child into the room and introduce him to the teacher and other children in the room. Sit down and get him started on an activity.
4. **Remember that this is a normal phase that most children go through.** - As your child is trying to develop his independence and testing his boundaries try not to give in. Reassure him that he will be fine and reassure yourself of the same thing.
5. **Make friends with others from church with children in the same class.** - If your child has friends in the class he'll be more likely to be exited about coming to church. For contact info for other parents please see David Mock.
6. **Make a plan and communicate it to your child and the teacher.** - Plan on staying in the room for 10 minutes the first week and asking the teacher to call you after 10 minutes of crying. The next week, stay 7 minutes and leave for 13. Then stay 5 and leave for 15. Within a few weeks your child will understand that you will come back and will adjust to the new environment.
7. **Develop a special goodbye routine.** - This can be a secret handshake, a high five and a cuddle or saying something silly like 'see ya later alligator.'
8. **Leave without fanfare.** - Let your child know when you are leaving. Tell them you love them at that you'll be back soon, then calmly walk out of the room, don't stall and NEVER sneak out of the room.
9. **Leave completely.** - Don't be tempted to stand outside the door or in the hall waiting for them to stop crying. They can sense you are there and it'll just be more gut wrenching on you. Trust the teachers in the room and know that they will call you in a few minutes if he hasn't settled, or call you to tell you he has if that will make you feel better.
10. **PRAY** - Trust this phase of your child's life, along with every other, to God and know that He will bring you through it.