

On Separation Anxiety



**An Opportunity for Gospel
Parenting in Community**

On Separation Anxiety: An Opportunity for Gospel Parenting in Community
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When we gather as a body, we often participate in ministry activities that bless us with some form of childcare or intentional time of training for children. In these situations, it is fairly common for us to observe our younger children showing some level of discomfort when we temporarily entrust them to other caregivers. Some children respond with tears and a firm grasp of our clothes (or hair!), while their voice decibels increase dramatically as you approach the room. Others grow extremely quiet, while warily considering their surroundings and the strange adults trying to help them adjust.

When we refer to these common situations, we generally speak of “separation anxiety.” Using this term makes sense of the situation. Our child is anxious because he/she is unsure not only of the new surroundings and the new people, but whether their beloved mommy and daddy will return. Sometimes, separation anxiety rises to the level of a mental disorder. In this case, parents should use great wisdom in seeking further assistance from qualified personnel.² However, with this clarification in mind, we generally use “separation anxiety” to describe *a child’s normal fearful reaction to a big world, filled with people less familiar to them, while we step away for a season.*

Not all parents will have to deal with separation anxiety in their children, and those who do will need to respond to it at various levels over differing periods of time. Nevertheless, as a people who share a common union with Christ in one body, we all bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). What I would like to do,

¹I am grateful for the partnership in the gospel that we share with Jason and Kimberly Lee and Michael and Darla Wilkinson, who not only leaped at the opportunity to read the first draft amid many other responsibilities, but also joyfully shared their wisdom and insight for the exaltation of Christ among the next generation.

²For further medical advice, see Lawrence Robinson, Jeanne Segal, and Melinda Smith, “Separation Anxiety in Children,” (Helpguide, June 2013), http://www.helpguide.org/mental/separation_anxiety_causes_prevention_treatment.htm (accessed August 8, 2013), or also Roxanne D. Edwards and Melissa C. Stöppler, “Separation Anxiety Disorder,” (MedicineNet, August 20, 2010), http://www.medicinenet.com/separation_anxiety/article.htm (accessed August 8, 2013).

therefore, is begin to answer how we might help each other as parents and as a church in shepherding our children through these times. I have outlined a few ways to view separation anxiety, followed by a few practical ideas to prepare our children from week to week. By no means will I provide all the answers, and none of the helps I have written below are a so-called “guaranteed fix.” However, perhaps some of what the Lord has graced me with from his word and others will at least give you a starting place for caring for your child in this specific matter.

Occasions of Separation Anxiety:

Opportunities for Gospel Parenting in Community

First, occasions of separation anxiety are opportunities to preach the gospel to children. Every struggle is an opportunity for us to teach them about God’s uniqueness. God is *better* than mommies and daddies. God is the only person who is everywhere present all the time. What is more, God is never far away from those who trust his Son. He is near to them as a shield, refuge, comfort, strong tower, protector, provider, and father. Parents may even share how God helped them overcome their own fears and anxieties.

Second, occasions of separation anxiety are opportunities to teach children about trusting daddy’s and mommy’s caring leadership. By telling your children that you plan to return for them, and then do so an hour later, they gradually learn to trust what you say. These mini-lessons will not only help children trust their parents on other occasions, but also help them understand what it is like to keep trusting God’s word when we can’t see him (e.g. 1 Peter 1:8-9).

Third, occasions of separation anxiety are opportunities for parents to remember the gospel and preach the gospel to other parents. A parent does not have to feel embarrassed about their child’s anxious crying. A parent also does not have to grow frustrated or impatient with the anxious child. Instead of succumbing to either side of this fear of man (“What are others

thinking about my parenting?”), parents can rejoice that their identity remains in Christ, not their smooth parenting skills. When we remember the gospel together, we will be quick to encourage each other in the truth and/or listen to advice from other parents with patience and gratitude.

Fourth, occasions of separation anxiety are opportunities for parents to recognize the blessings of a body of believers to help us live consistently with the gospel in all of life. Other believers are serving us as childcare workers and are helping us walk through this season with our children in grace. Through these occasions, we are reminded that we need the gospel partnership of God’s body. Part of God’s gracious pattern throughout Scripture is to unite his faithful ones to a community of redeemed saints, so that we can benefit from the godly wisdom that fills a redeemed community instead of parenting in isolation.

Dealing with Separation Anxiety:

Practical Ideas for Preparing Children from Week to Week

Helping children overcome their separation anxiety does not happen merely once a week when the time comes to drop them off. Like many other parental responsibilities, such help calls for intentional preparation throughout each week and patient endurance on each occasion of separation anxiety. A few practical ways to help prepare your child for times when you step away include the following:

(1) Pray Scripture passages like Philippians 4:4-8 for your child during the week and beside the door before dropping them off for class. Committing this anxiety to the Lord will also train your child to see that his/her help and refuge is found ultimately in the Lord, with whom “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

(2) Parents should also pray such Scripture passages for themselves. If parents are worried and/or concerned about how their child will do when separated from them (i.e. parental anxiety), they should talk with one another about issues of distrust and/or control that may exist in their own hearts and bring these issues

together before the Lord in faith in his loving care and provision. Children take cues from their parents and if the parents are anxious, the child is more likely to be as well.

(3) Make the next occasion of separation a regular topic of discussion with your child. For example, you might say, “Joey, guess what you’re going to do this Sunday? On Sunday, you are going to Sunday School with your friends; and daddy and mommy are going to Sunday School with their friends! And, we are all going to learn about Jesus!” Whatever words or phrases you choose to use as an encouragement, repeat them everyday leading up to the Sunday gathering, and perhaps repeatedly the Saturday before.

(4) Be familiar with the schedule and components of your child’s class so that you can be specific in your encouragements. For example, “Let’s sing that song that you sing in Sunday School;” or, “Here’s the picture that you colored in Sunday School. Look at how Jesus is holding the children.”

(5) Reaffirm for your child that the teachers care for him/her. For example, “Daddy and mommy love you so much! Mr. Michael and Miss Amy love you so much, too! You are going to stay with Mr. Michael and Miss Amy to learn about Jesus, but we will come back and get you!”

(6) Develop a routine “goodbye.” A routine may reassure the child on drop-off and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss. Moreover, try to leave without fanfare. Tell your child that you are leaving, that you will return, and then go; do not stall or return prematurely. If a need for further instructions arises, ask another parent in the hallway to pass along the information or needed item. Most parents would see this as a way to serve each other. In situations like DIG, where the same people care for your child weekly, communicate openly with the leaders to see what drop-off strategy may be most appropriate in guiding the child through this season as well as transitioning into his/her class.

(7) Resolve conflicts in the home in a timely fashion and in God-honoring ways. If parents are in conflict, their children may be more anxious at the time of separation.

(8) Practice separation. For example, schedule a date night with your spouse and have a sitter care for your child. If old

enough, schedule times for your child to play at one of their friends' houses while you run to the grocery store. When you return, point out each time how the Lord took care of them and how they can trust what mommy and daddy say.

(9) Use a doll or favorite toy to do a role-play. Let your child be the "parent" and drop off their "child" at "Sunday School" or "Care Group." You could be the nursery worker or teacher and comment on how much you love the children and how much fun you have teaching them about God's love, etc.

(10) If possible, schedule naps or feedings before times of separation. Infants and Crawlers are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they are tired or hungry. For toddlers, ensure that they are getting plenty of rest at night throughout the week, especially the night before an occasion of separation.

(11) Keep familiar surroundings when possible and make new surroundings familiar. Have the sitter come to your house. When your child is away from home, let him/her bring a familiar object.

(12) Minimize any television or video games that would foster fear in your child. Your child is less likely to be fearful if the shows you watch and games you play are not frightening. Psalm 119:37 may be useful here: "Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your [the LORD's] ways."