

When Drop-Off is Hard: Understanding Separation Anxiety

By Dr Justin Coulson

The scene is familiar to every parent: you're trying to leave for work, and your three-year-old is wrapped around your leg like a koala, tears streaming down their face, begging you not to go. The educator is gently trying to prise them away while you fight back your own tears (or embarrassment), wondering if you're traumatising your child for life.

Here's the truth that might surprise you: **those heart-wrenching goodbyes don't mean what you think they mean.** Research [shows](#) that separation anxiety peaks between 10-18 months and again around ages two to three— and bizarrely, it's actually a sign of healthy attachment, not damage. And here's the really important part: most children who sob at drop-off are happily playing within minutes.

Why Young Children React This Way

Separation anxiety isn't the same as leaving a baby to "cry it out" alone in their cot. Babies have no sense of time and no way of understanding that you'll return.

But your preschooler? They're beginning to grasp routines. They're learning that even when you disappear, you come back. The problem is, they're still learning—and learning feels scary.

Think of it this way: your child knows you exist when you're gone (psychologists call this "object permanence"), but they don't fully trust it [yet](#). It's like knowing intellectually that the aeroplane won't crash, but still gripping the armrests during turbulence.

And here's something crucial: your child isn't alone in an empty room. They're surrounded by caring adults and other children. Research [shows](#) that children can form secure relationships with multiple caregivers—educators, grandparents, family friends—without it diminishing their bond with you. While saying goodbye feels difficult, your child is entering a community where relationships and routines provide security.

[Studies consistently show](#) that most children who cry at separation calm within 5-10 minutes and engage positively with activities and peers. The intensity of the goodbye rarely matches the reality of their day.

Signs Your Child Is Actually Fine

Two things tell you far more than the tears at drop-off:

How Quickly They Settle Ask the educators: "How long does she cry after I leave?" For most children, it's minutes, not hours. If your educator says, "Oh, she's usually playing blocks within five minutes," believe them. That information is gold—far more reliable than your guilt.

How They Greet You at Pick-Up A joyful, enthusiastic reunion—racing toward you with open arms and a huge smile—is a brilliant sign. This is what [secure attachment](#) looks like: brief distress at separation, but confident reconnection when you return.

If your child is consistently withdrawn, flat, or distressed at the end of every single day for weeks, that's different. That's worth investigating. But an excited "Mummy!" or "Daddy!" at pick-up? That's your child telling you they're okay.

What Actually Helps

Keep Mornings Predictable Children feel safer when they know what's coming. Tell them the plan: "After breakfast, we'll drive to preschool. Miss Sarah will say hello. I'll give you a hug and go to work. After your afternoon snack, I'll come back." Repeat this script daily. Predictability reduces anxiety.

Say Goodbye Quickly and Confidently This feels brutal, but it works: a quick hug, "I love you, see you this afternoon," and go. [Research shows](#) that long, anxious goodbyes actually increase children's distress. Your child reads your emotions. If you linger and look worried, they think, "Mum looks scared—this must be dangerous!" A confident goodbye signals: "This is normal and safe."

Give Them a Comfort Object A small photo in their pocket, a scarf that smells like you, or the "hand-kiss" from *The Kissing Hand* book can work wonders. These "transitional objects" provide comfort when you're [apart](#).

Partner With Educators Ask if they can greet your child with a favourite activity or buddy them up with another child. Quality educators understand separation anxiety and have strategies to ease [transitions](#). Work together—they're on your team.

Create a Pick-Up Ritual Give your child something to look forward to: "After preschool, we'll go to the park" or "We'll have afternoon tea and you can tell me about your day." Consistent, warm reunions reinforce the message: I always come back.

Fill Their Cup Before You Go If mornings are rushed and disconnected, separation is harder. Wake up 15 minutes earlier for a cuddle, silly songs in the car, or a special breakfast together. Children who feel emotionally "full" separate more easily.

When It Might Be Something More

If your child cries intensely for 20+ minutes after you leave, shows distress throughout the entire day (not just at drop-off), or dreads attending for weeks despite your best efforts, trust your instincts. Sometimes a child needs:

- Reduced hours initially, building up gradually
- A different group or educator match
- A short break to regroup
- Professional support from a child psychologist

And remember: socialisation doesn't only happen at preschool. Playgroups, park playdates, and family gatherings all build social skills.

The Truth About Those Tears

Separation anxiety is hard—genuinely hard—for both of you. But here's what research tells us: high-quality early childhood education provides significant benefits for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development that extend well into [adolescence](#). Your child is building resilience, forming friendships, and learning that the world beyond home is safe and interesting.

And when you walk in at pick-up and see that face light up, those arms reach out, hear that delighted shriek of "You're here!"—remember: your bond isn't broken. It's actually strengthening. They're learning one of life's most important lessons: we can be apart and still be deeply, securely connected.

Your challenge: This week, ask the educator what happens 10 minutes after you leave. Compare that reality to your anxiety during your commute. Notice the gap between your worry and their actual experience.

👉 For more strategies to support your child's big feelings, check out the Happy Families Summit [Little People, Big Feelings](#).



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