

## Make Goodbyes Easier for Children and Parents

*Betsy R. Schenck, Retired Extension Specialist, Child Development, Virginia State University*

It is never easy for a young child to say “goodbye” to mother or father, especially to the parent who spends the most time with him or her—who provides food to ease hunger pains and kisses to make “bumps” well. Children, especially those under three years of age, can’t bear to see their parents leave. It is also hard for parents to say “goodbye” to children who cry and cling to them.

In one way, it’s a good sign when children are so attached to parents that they are unhappy when parents leave them, even for short periods of time. It shows that there is a strong bond between parent and child. That bond is necessary for the child to grow into a confident, independent person.

Parents, however, need free time away from the children—for a couple of hours while they go to a movie or for eight hours while they work. Parents can make separations easier for themselves and the children by preparing for it.

### MAKING SEPARATIONS EASIER

#### *Building a Love Bond with Your Child*

During the first year of life babies develop a strong tie to the person who takes care of them. It is usually the mother, but children may form ties with fathers, grandmothers, or child care workers also.

Babies cry when they are distressed—cold, hungry, or tired of lying in one position. When you respond to the cries and ease the distress, babies begin to associate you with feeling comfortable. They rely on you to come when they cry. Gradually they begin to love and trust you. Once babies feel secure, it is easier for them to say “goodbye” when parents leave for an hour or a day.

Some parents think that responding to babies every time they cry will spoil them. Quite the opposite is true. Research shows that when parents respond quickly and consistently to cries during the first months, babies cry less often and for less time later on. Babies who have been ignored and their cries not responded to are the very ones who fuss and cry a good deal and are difficult to control.



#### *Play Games*

Babies can’t hold pictures of you in their minds. When you are out of sight, it is as though you don’t exist. Games such as “peek-a-boo” help baby learn that you will reappear. Later, “hide-and-seek” helps toddlers learn about separations.

### ***Never Sneak Away***

Always tell the child when you are going and when you will be back, even though the child may not understand your words. For example, “Todd, I’m going to work now and I’ll be back at 5:00.” For children who don’t understand time, use events such as “after your nap,” or “after you play outside.”

Give the child a hug, a kiss, and wave “good-bye.” Never sneak out when the child is asleep or looking the other way.

### ***Prepare Children for Your Departure***

Young children like to know what to expect. Explain to them ahead of time when you plan to leave. For example, mother said to two-year-old Ella, “Daddy and I are going out to dinner tonight and you are going to stay with Aunt Evy. She will read a story to you and put you to bed, and we will come pick you up and take you home.” Young children don’t understand time and they have short memories, so mother told Ella what to expect about three times that day. Ella was well-prepared for her parents’ departure and said “goodbye” without a tear.



### ***Get Them Used to New People Gradually***

Leave children with someone they know whenever possible. Invite the sitter to come for a visit once or twice before the sitter stays alone with the child. If this isn’t possible, have the sitter come an hour before you leave.

Try to keep the same person caring for your child. Changes are upsetting.



### ***Be Picky About Where You Leave Your Child***

It is easier to say “goodbye” when you know you are leaving your child in capable hands—easier for you and easier for the child. Choose babysitters carefully. Check their references. A child is much happier when left with a sitter who reads stories and plays games than with one who watches TV and doesn’t want to be bothered.

Choose day care centers carefully. Check with other parents about their experiences. Spend as much time choosing a center as you would choosing a new car. It is more important to you and to your child. Children may shed a few tears when you leave them with a babysitter or at a day care center, but the tears won’t last long if you leave them where they are well cared for.

### ***Get Them Used to New Places Gradually***

Adjusting to new places, new faces, and new routines is difficult for children. Doing something for the first time is scary even for adults. Children going to nursery school, church school, or a day care center need to have mother or father with them at first. Ease children into new situations. Plan to visit a new place several times and stay with the child.

Learn the names of the teacher, the children your child will play with, and the routine. Then you can talk to your child about what to expect. For example, “Tomorrow we are going to Friendly Center and you can play with Kay and Tamara and Mitch and Bart. Mrs. Noel is the teacher.”

Explain the routine so the child will know what to expect. For example, “Tomorrow when you go to Friendly Center, you can play with the other children. You will have lunch, take a nap, and then play outside. I will come for you when the little hand on the clock points to the “5.”

### ***Let Children Take Something Familiar to a New Place***

When children go to a day care center or nursery school, they may feel a little lost at first. Allow them to take a favorite toy with them. It helps them feel safer in a strange place.

### ***Expect Some Anxiety***

Adjusting to new situations is difficult for children and adults. When children begin attending nursery school, a day care center, or kindergarten for the first time, they may express their anxiety by being irritable, whining, having nightmares, wetting their pants, or clinging to you. Be calm and don't add to the anxiety. Give them time to adjust.

If, however, unusual behavior continues for any length of time, you may need to give the child a half-hour more attention at bedtime or find a quieter center where groups are smaller. You may need to talk to the child's teacher or change to a different place where the child will be content.

### ***When It's Time to Leave, Don't Prolong It.***

Often parents worry about leaving their children. If the child fusses or cries, the parents fear the child will fuss or cry the whole time they are gone. They hang around and say, "I'm going now, OK?" If the parent is unsure about



leaving, the child will certainly feel unsure about being left! Prepare children ahead of time, leave them in good hands, then tell them goodbye, and leave. Don't stretch it out. Children may cry a few minutes, but usually, as soon as you are gone, they get over it.

Preparing children for separations makes it easier for the parent and the child. Parents can leave knowing the child will be all right while they are gone.

