



Early years practice procedures

Managing separation anxiety in children under 2 years old

Separation anxiety occurs when babies and toddlers do not feel securely attached to their key person or regular staff within the room. Taking steps to reduce anxiety and promote attachment is a priority task for the key person in partnership with the parents/carers.

- Separation anxiety can be identified when signals are clearly understood by members of staff.
- Distress in children produces high levels of corticosteroids (neurochemicals) which hinder brain functioning. It is detrimental for babies to experience prolonged distress. Signals include:
 - crying inconsolably for extended periods; causing coughing or difficulty to breath or vomiting
 - holding breath
 - head banging or rocking
 - ambivalent feelings towards the key person, i.e. wanting to be picked up then struggling free
 - frantic movement or lashing out with arms and legs
 - biting, tantrums and snatching from others.
 - jealousy shown towards other children in the key group
 - refusing food or drink or showing signs of digestive problems
 - temporary interest in toys or others, then crying again.
 - prolonged periods of sleep
 - switching off, staring blankly
 - anxiousness about who is coming in and out of a room, standing by the door for long periods
 - being held, but not responding or smiling
 - crying when the parent collects or cheering up and eager when parent collects

- A picture of evidence builds up which may suggest that the baby/toddler is experiencing separation anxiety. This needs to be discussed with the parent/carer and a plan made to help the child settle.
- The parent and key person discuss the reasons that the separation anxiety has developed or been made worse. It could be due to:
 - inadequate settling in period due to different factors that include absence, holiday. On occasions this cant be helped but generally settling in periods are arranged around the family so that all the settles can be attended.
 - changes of staff
 - part time attendance not allowing sufficient continuity for the baby to become familiar with the surroundings and to make an attachment to the key person and staff
 - change of key person in the setting
 - changes at home – stress events in the family
 - baby’s illness
 - family having been away on holiday
 - previous distressing experiences with another setting
- The goal of any plan is to ensure the child is secure through forming an attachment with the key person and familiar staff who care for the child.
- The settling in process is reviewed; if any aspect has been missed, this needs to be re-planned. This may include the need for the parent/carer to stay or find a close relative or friend whom the child feels safe with if the parent/carer cannot be there.