

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Separation Anxiety

Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges in Infants

Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My eight-month-old baby becomes very upset whenever I leave her with her grandparents. How can I help her calm down?

In their guidebook *Bright Futures*, the American Academy of Pediatrics writes, “Infants as young as four to five months may be anxious when they are separated from their parents, to meet strangers or even familiar relatives. Even grandparents need to allow the infant to warm up to them before taking the infant ... This anxiety peaks at about eight months. This is not a rejection, but a normal developmental phase.”

1. Remember this is a normal part of your child's development. Anxiety in the face of separation from a parent, no matter how brief, is a typical reaction for an 8-month-old. This emotional response is actually a good sign that your baby feels secure and connected with you and knows the difference between you and other people.

Babies will differ in the intensity of their reactions and in the amount of time it takes for them to calm down and return to normal. So, you need to pay attention to whether your baby is enthusiastic or cautious about new experiences. You will want to provide more support to a baby who tends to be cautious.

Babies also differ in the intensity of their reactions as they get older. As they gain more experience in being away from you and in calming themselves down, they are less likely to get upset.

Instead of thinking of separation in a negative way, think of it as an opportunity to teach your child to venture out into new experiences and to learn skills in Taking on Challenges.

2. Create support for your baby in learning to calm down. The key is to recognize your baby's natural tendencies and to build on these. Look for ways that your baby already tries to calm down by asking yourself what is helpful to her.

- “Does your baby use a pacifier or suck a finger?”
- “Does your baby calm down when you sing or hold her?”
- “Does your baby respond to new people better when they approach slowly and quietly? Or is she ready for active play right away?”

You will help your baby through this transition by doing what helps best.

In an experiment, Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley found that when a parent looks fearful, a baby will not try something new; but if the parent smiles or shows that trying something new is okay, the child will venture out. As Campos puts it, “By 11 to 12 months of age, the baby is already doing what all of us do when something unusual happens—we look around to figure out how other people are reacting.” Adults' nonverbal reactions determine how babies react in uncertain situations.

3. Send messages of confidence. Taking on Challenges includes believing that you can do things even when they are hard. Your child is looking to you for signals on how to respond based on your actions, words and non-verbal communication. Be reassuring by showing confidence in your child's ability to make the separation.

For example, you can say:

- "You can do this. I will come back and pick you up."
- You can also remind your baby of the skills that she has: "Grandma is here to take care of you. You have your blanket, and I will come back to pick you up."

Even at a very young age, your child can understand the message you are sending with all of the things you say (and don't say).

4. Be clear. It is best to be clear. For example, give a kiss, assure your child that you will come back, and then leave. Although it's hard, it works best to leave once you have said goodbye and not to linger. When the transition is prolonged, it is often more difficult on both you and your baby. If babies are with loving and sensitive adults, they typically calm down soon after their parent leaves.

When you help your child be with other loving adults, you are modeling a skill you want your child to learn and giving her a skill for life.

These four strategies will promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges and work to move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who learn to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

Prescriptions for Learning were created with funding from the Popplestone Foundation.

Visit us at mindinthemaking.org. Follow us on [Facebook.com/MindInTheMaking](https://www.facebook.com/MindInTheMaking).

© 2016 The Bezos Family Foundation. All rights reserved.

Disclaimer: Any advisory or instructional information included on this tip sheet is intended as general advice only and should not be considered advice that will necessarily apply to any specific circumstance or to any individual child. Parents and other individuals are advised to receive professional advice or counseling from a qualified professional familiar with your unique situation before selecting the appropriate care or educational procedures to be used. Neither The Bezos Family Foundation nor any individuals named herein will be responsible for the results of your acting solely on these recommendations.