

Promoting Mindfulness

Helping Young Children Cope With Separation

Julia Yeary

Jayden (7 months) is fussy, and the usual ways to help calm her are not working. Mia, her caregiver, knew this might happen. Today is the first day for Jayden without her mom, Tammy, who just left on a four-month deployment with the National Guard. Jayden's father, Eric, looks stressed and sad this morning at drop-off.

Mia is glad that she brainstormed strategies with Jayden's parents several months ago, when they first learned Tammy was going to be away. Mia learned that Eric and Tammy already shared responsibilities for Jayden's care. They had started planning for Eric to assume all the caregiving tasks before Tammy left, so Jayden would have an easier time with this transition. Today, Mia knows Jayden probably needs extra nurturing and patience. She plans to play for Jayden a recording of Tammy singing.

Mia is also glad that she has built in a few extra minutes at pickup time to talk to Eric about how things are going. She has a new idea to share with him. She asks Eric to bring in one of Tammy's T-shirts, one that she has worn a lot. It will have Tammy's scent on it, and Mia is pretty sure that that smell will help comfort Jayden. Mia can use it to wrap Jayden as she holds, feeds, and comforts her.

Eric brings in one of Tammy's T-shirts the next day. He also reports that when he tried that strategy at home, it helped Jayden settle more quickly. He has emailed Tammy, and she plans to send home shirts regularly to help Jayden remember her and be comforted by her smell, even though Tammy is thousands of miles away.

What the research tells us

Helping children cope with separation from their families is something teachers do daily. Learning to separate from a trusted caregiver and knowing he will return is a major developmental task for infants and toddlers. It is typical for a separation reaction to emerge between 6 and 8 months of age, and again around 18 months of age, as young children develop strong attachments to the significant people in their lives. Some children handle transitions more easily than others. Some children may protest separations through fussy or clingy behaviors; they may cry and

fight to return to their loved ones. They also may withdraw and become difficult to engage. These strong feelings most often emerge during transitions, particularly drop-off and pickup times in a child care setting.

Most early care and education professionals are quite adept at helping families develop routines to honor the difficulty of these moments and help children cope—assisting children with the transition from home to the care setting and back again. Long gone are the days when providers encouraged family members to “sneak out” while their children weren't looking. Now, early childhood professionals understand how important it is to build the trust between children and their families, in part by giving clear messages that while the family member may be leaving, he or she will return. Understanding the importance of healthy attachments and how secure attachments foster children's feelings of safety and security helps to shape the way teachers approach transitions (Berlin, Cassidy, & Appleyard 2008).

What may be new to many teachers is the idea of promoting *mindfulness*—embracing strategies that are designed to keep a child connected to her family throughout the day. The goal is to help the child understand that her loved ones care for her all the time, even when not in her presence. As Pawl (2006) states, “She carries it with her—this sense of nurturance, of the parents' presence even in absence, and her existence for them. She is held in the parents' mind” (3). While most families do not have to leave their children for long periods of time, as military parents do, there is much to learn from families coping with deployments about how to keep an absent parent in a child's mind and keep the child in the parent's mind (Thompson 2007).

Getting started

In helping to promote mindfulness in a very young child, consider how best to engage his senses. Research shows that by 6 to 8 weeks of age, an infant is already able to recognize his mother's and father's smells, voices, and faces (Brazelton & Greenspan 2000).

Infants

For infants, you might ask families, as Mia did in the opening vignette, to leave items with their scent at your setting. Some primary caregivers lightly spray their

cologne or perfume onto a stuffed animal or blanket (be alert to scent allergies of others in your care). Remind family members to bring new items every few weeks so that items continue to hold the loved one's scent.

Voice is also a powerful tool. Family members might record themselves singing, reading nursery rhymes, or sharing a caring message for their children that you can play when children have difficulty settling down. Families can also be encouraged to leave a baby-safe photo book with pictures of family and other loved ones. Looking through this book can be a soothing experience for children at difficult points during the day.

Narrating how the child might be feeling during these transitions is also important. Sensitively give voice to the emotions the child may be experiencing: "I know you are sad because your mommy had to go on a trip and will be away for a while. Your nana is at work, and she will be here in the afternoon to pick you up, just like always. And I am here, and I will be with you until Nana comes." These are important messages that even a very young child can understand and be comforted by.

Toddlers

For a young toddler, keep reminders of home easily accessible. If a child is thinking about his family, he can go to his cubby or bin to get his treasured items, such as a photo book. You can also play prerecorded messages or songs whenever the toddler needs to hear his loved one's voice, just as you do for infants. Continue to give voice to the child's feelings. A toddler may want you to repeat the story of where his father has gone over and over so he can process the separation. "Your daddy had to go on a long trip. He loves you very much and thinks about you every day. Your mommy is home. She takes care of you, makes you good food, gives you baths, and plays with you. And I take care of you too! We play and sing and eat together. Soon, your daddy will come home. Until then, your mommy and I will care for you. And your daddy will think about you all the time too!"

For older toddlers, strategies to promote mindfulness include drawing pictures and dictating messages to send to family members they miss. Children who miss their families might delight in dictating letters to their loved ones followed by placing the letters in envelopes to deliver at pickup time. For older toddlers with a family member away for an extended period of time, you can help create countdown chains so they can better understand the passage of time and anticipate the person's return.

Plan ahead

If a primary caregiver is going to be away for an extended period, it is even more important that you communicate regularly with the family before the departure. Ask all family members before the separation what you can do

to help support their child and family during this period. Plan how you can involve the away family member, based on his or her availability and accessibility. Discuss with the family all the ways to keep the child-parent connection strong. Take pictures of the child engaged in her daily activities or during special events and send them to the absent family member. Or scan the child's artwork to email if the parent has access. Before, during, and after the return, keep the lines of communication open and share any concerns you may have about the child's behavior immediately with the family. It's important to work together to support the child in order to minimize stress and promote healthy attachments.

Think about it

- Think about your own experiences with separations from loved ones. How do you stay connected to those close to you when they are away?
- What can you do in your program to promote mindfulness? How can you help young children and their primary caregivers stay connected with each other throughout the day? How can you strengthen the relationship you have with the families of the children in your care? What strategies do you use to build the connection with families? What others might you like to try?

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Try it

- Explore some of the strategies listed in this column.
- Ask families for their ideas about keeping parent-child connections strong throughout the day.

Check out additional resources on supporting young children with military parents at www.zerotothree.org/military.

Whether a loved one is away for the day or for an extended period of time, caregivers play an important role in helping an infant or toddler understand that she remains in that person's heart. By giving voice to a child's feelings and offering ways for the child to feel connected to her loved one, you help to strengthen the attachment between family and child, laying the foundation for the child's success in learning and in life.

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- Pearson SSIS/ [13](#)
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