

## 09 Early Years Practice Procedures

### 09.11 Managing separation anxiety in children under 2 years old


#### Our Aim

Separation anxiety occurs when babies and toddlers do not feel securely attached to their key person. At Peekaboo Childcare, reducing anxiety and promoting secure attachments is a priority for staff, working closely with parents.

#### Recognising Separation Anxiety

Staff can identify separation anxiety through observable signals. Babies and toddlers experiencing distress may display some of the following:

- Crying inconsolably for extended periods, sometimes causing coughing, difficulty breathing, or vomiting
- Holding their breath
- Head banging or rocking
- Ambivalent behaviour towards the key person (wanting to be picked up, then struggling free)
- Frantic movements or lashing out with arms and legs
- Biting, tantrums, or snatching from others
- Jealousy towards other children in the key group
- Refusing food or drink, or showing digestive problems
- Temporary interest in toys or others, then crying again
- Prolonged periods of sleep
- “Switching off” or staring blankly
- Anxiety about who is entering or leaving the room, standing by the door for long periods
- Being held but not responding or smiling
- Crying when a parent leaves or showing a sudden change in mood when the parent returns

 **Why it matters:** Prolonged distress raises levels of stress neurochemicals (corticosteroids) which can hinder brain functioning. It is important to address distress early.

## Understanding the Causes

Separation anxiety may develop due to various factors, including:

- Hurried settling-in due to parental pressures
- Inadequate settling-in because of the key person being absent or inconsistent attendance
- Absence of the key person during the settling-in period
- Changes in staff or change of key person
- Part-time attendance limiting continuity and familiarity with the key person
- Changes or stress events at home
- Baby's illness
- Family holiday or prolonged absence
- Previous distressing experiences at another setting

## Goals of Support

The main aim is to ensure the child feels secure and confident through forming a strong attachment with their key person.

## Planning and Intervention

1. Review Settling-in Process
  - Check if all stages of settling-in (Proximity, Secure Base, Dependency) were followed
  - Re-plan any missed aspects
2. Parental Involvement
  - Parent or a close, trusted adult may stay with the child temporarily if the parent cannot be present
  - Work with parents to identify routines or familiar items that help the child feel safe
3. Consistent Key Person
  - Ensure the child has a dedicated key person and, if needed, a secondary key person for continuity
4. Gradual Separation
  - Introduce the child to short separations first
  - Increase time away as confidence and attachment grow
5. Regular Review
  - Staff and parents monitor progress
  - Adjust strategies as the child becomes more secure and comfortable

## Key Principles

- The child's emotional wellbeing comes first
- Staff work in partnership with parents to understand triggers and develop a consistent plan
- All actions aim to reduce anxiety and build trust and confidence