

## Understanding Childhood

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into children's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to understand their behaviour.

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This leaflet was originally published by the Child Psychotherapy Trust.

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[www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

email:  
[info@understandingchildhood.net](mailto:info@understandingchildhood.net)  
tel: 01303 261000

# separations and changes in the early years

## understanding the anxieties of parents and children from birth to four years

When babies are born they leave the warm and comfortable world of the womb and enter an unknown world. It is their first experience of separation and the beginning of a lifelong series of steps and challenges. Each stage of the process – going to the childminder, starting school, leaving home – is marked by a separation. Our early experiences colour the ways that we respond to all the other experiences of separation during our lifetime.

The strong emotions that babies feel from birth, including joy, sadness, anxiety and rage, are partly a response to the separation from their mother. This is normal. And it is not only the baby who can feel this – mothers also have to adjust to letting go of the baby inside and facing the demands and needs of a separate human being.

It is a highly charged time emotionally for everybody, and one that represents an enormous change for the whole family.

### Forming attachments

In the first year of life, children need to experience secure attachment to a caring adult. Babies often experience secure attachments with more than one adult, but for most babies the first bond with their mother is the most important. The experience of a secure attachment may also come from a carer, the extended family or another mother or father figure. Children who are able to form secure attachments are likely to be more resilient and to be able to manage stressful events better later in life.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets  
*Your new baby, your family and you*



### Letting go

The process of separating from your baby is a gradual one.

In the early weeks babies develop emotionally and physically from having all their needs closely met. Security comes from not having to wait too long to be fed or cuddled. Giving comfort and reassurance, and responding quickly to the baby's needs, does not 'spoil' them at this stage.

Babies gradually have to learn to tolerate being part of a wider community where the needs of other children, and mother herself, also have to be met. Both you and the baby have to learn to separate yourselves from one another – to let go of that 'all-in-oneness' you might have had at an earlier stage.

For some mothers it can be a relief to let go of the very dependent baby stage. The baby may be equally ready to move on and, some time during the first year, the mother can really enjoy seeing her baby become more independent in playing and settling down. But for other mothers and their babies, this transition presents more of a hurdle. These mothers sometimes say 'My baby won't let me put her down'.

### Changing your baby's routine

Mothers and babies are all individuals with different temperaments, strengths and weaknesses, so for



### Coping with the child's feelings about childcare

Some babies and young children are fine about being separated from their mother or carer but many of them feel some anxiety. It is very important to take particular care to address the emotional needs of your baby or young child when they are going to be separated from you while you go to work. Take time over introducing the baby to their new carer and be alert to the atmosphere of your baby's surroundings.

It is important to plan and prepare for parting and for coming back together, as these transition times are difficult for the baby and for you. For instance, you can ease the parting by leaving your child with a loved object – a favourite teddy or piece of blanket – or something familiar of your own that smells of you and feels like part of you.

No matter what kind of childcare is arranged, babies and young children can experience separation anxiety. This means that when the mother (or another adult to whom the baby is attached – their father or a 'mother-figure') leaves, the baby may show signs of panic, distress or rage. Crying and clinging are normal reactions. The baby may feel they are 'falling apart' without the comfort of the person who is most familiar to them.

It is not unusual for the baby to be cold and withdrawn when their mother comes back, giving mother the experience of feeling rejected.

It will take a little time for you to see whether your child has settled. The tears and tantrums when you leave, and clinging or rejection when you come back, are not necessarily a sign that your child has not settled, but may be an expression of how they feel about the separation. This is to be expected when a baby moves into the wider world and has to adjust to the changes. It does not necessarily mean that you have made the wrong choice of childcare, or that you should give up work.

### Starting at a pre-school or nursery school

Starting pre-school or nursery school is an important stage in the separation process and the feelings aroused or battles waged at an earlier stage often re-emerge at this point. Many children embrace this change without a backward glance. It is sometimes the mother in this situation who feels sad and disappointed at having to let go and move on.

Some children feel very ready for the stimulus of other children, toys, educational challenges and all that the new world of pre-school or nursery school has to offer. But many young children who are developing normally nevertheless find this

particular stage of life very difficult.

They may express their feelings through crying and clinging. They may also return to baby habits and behaviour, such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting or accidents at school, tantrums and baby language. It is as if they are giving their parents the message that they want to go backwards to a more comfortable time rather than forwards to the next stage. It is common for parents to see enormous swings between moods of great dependence and independence – a little baby one minute and an assertive and exploratory three-year-old the next.

At this stage, some children may be very withdrawn and shy within groups, while others may show aggression and rivalry with others. Parents can be reassured that these extremes of mood and behaviour are normal and are not signs that their child is disturbed.

#### Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

*Sibling rivalry*

*Attending to difficult behaviour*



### Helping your child to settle

Parents can help their children to settle by showing them that they understand their feelings, while also encouraging them to move forward confidently. Games involving fantasy and role-playing are fun and are also an important way for children to sort out, with their peers and with their new carers, what they feel about all the changes and new experiences.

### Some helpful suggestions

- Any separation can provoke a sense of loss and be emotionally unsettling for both children and parents. Take it a step at a time – it needs to be a gradual process.
- Some changes of routine are experienced as a separation – moving on from breast or bottle-feeds, when the baby moves out of their parents' bedroom, if the family moves house.
- Prepare children for any change that is coming and try not to spring it on them. It helps to talk about it and rehearse for it – by acting it out as a game, for instance.
- Don't slip out without saying goodbye. Your child will trust you and be more confident if you say goodbye and acknowledge their feelings directly.
- A firm and confident goodbye at pre-school or nursery school tells your distressed child that you know they'll be able to cope. It's better not to hover and appear anxious.
- Separation encourages your child's developing independence even though it may cause stress at first.
- Most of us thrive on a healthy mix of stable routines and new challenges. Children do, too.

A child of this age who had the attention they needed at an earlier stage, is likely to have the invaluable tools of play and language to take their development a step further. Children who can talk about their feelings as mummy leaves, or who find a way of enacting what they are going through, can gradually make sense of their feelings and increase their capacity to tolerate these experiences. They can then move on to exploring the whole range of opportunities that new environments have to offer.

In a good pre-school or nursery setting, young children have the opportunity to learn a range of new skills and to sort out complicated feelings about themselves and others. Through playing and learning, they find out more themselves and the world around them.

They have a chance to prepare themselves for the next step, when they will enter the more formal world of primary school.



### Further help

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

#### Contacts

##### **YoungMinds Parents' Information Service**

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person

Free parents helpline 0808 802 5544

Web [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

##### **Parentline Plus**

Help and advice for anyone looking after a child

FREE parentline 0808 800 2222 (24hr)

Web [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

##### **ChildcareLink**

Information about child care and early years services in your local area

Free helpline 0800 234 6346

Web [www.childcarelink.gov.uk](http://www.childcarelink.gov.uk)

##### **Contact a Family**

Help for parents and families who care for children with any disability or special need

Helpline 0808 808 3555

Web [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

##### **Sure Start**

Sure Start programmes in the UK offer services and information for parents and children under four. To find if there is one in your area contact:

Helpline 0870 000 2288, or contact

ChildcareLink above

Web [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk)

**There are likely to be similar useful organisations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.**

Written by child psychotherapist

**Rachel Pick**

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Enquiries to:

**The Administrator**

**Understanding Childhood**

**PO Box 235**

**Hythe**

**Kent CT21 4WX**

t 01303 261000

e [info@understandingchildhood.net](mailto:info@understandingchildhood.net)

w [www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

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## crying and sleeping in the first months of life



Crying and sleeping problems are two of the most common difficulties for parents of babies under one. Nearly all parents will experience difficulties with their baby's crying or interrupted sleep in the early months.

Try to imagine the world from your baby's point of view. In the womb they were in a world of their own, made especially for them. In being born they have already made the most dangerous journey of their life, and now they have to become used to a world full of new feelings and people. It will take time. It will also take time for you, as a parent, to get to know your baby and – along with the excitement – to recover from the shock and tiredness of the birth and to adjust to the changes in your life from becoming responsible for a new baby.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets  
*Your new baby, your family and you*

### What babies need

All babies need food, sleep, warmth and loving attention, but all babies are different. Some are very tranquil and seem to fit easily into family life, but most babies have some difficulty settling into their new world. When they are full, cuddled and loved they may feel peaceful. But when they feel wet, hungry, alone – or just miserable – all they can do is cry and thrash about.

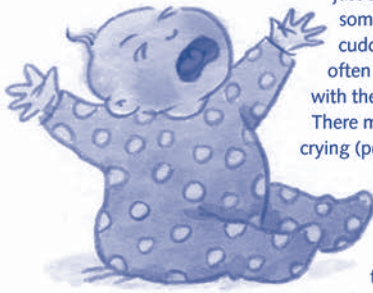
Babies don't ask for more than they need. If their demands seem overwhelming, it's not because they are 'trying it on' or are getting spoiled. A baby can't understand anyone else's point of view or consider anyone else's feelings; even a toddler is only just beginning to get some idea about these things.

A baby who comes through their first year feeling loved and understood is more likely to develop into a toddler who feels confident that a parent will come if they really need them. A child who has this confidence is less likely to fret if that attention isn't instantly available. This provides the best basis for learning about waiting and sharing.

### Why babies cry

Some parents say 'Why does my baby cry so much? Some days everything I do seems wrong!'

Crying is your baby's way of showing you their feelings. Sometimes they want food (or just to suck for comfort), sometimes they want you to cuddle and talk to them – but often they are just out of sorts with themselves and the world. There may be a pattern to their crying (possibly during the early evening) but often there is not. The baby is too young to have any way of helping themselves or of telling you what is troubling them. So all you can do is to be a sympathetic companion.



Try to bear with the crying because the baby needs your comfort and reassurance. It may be easier said than done because a baby's crying is specially designed to make you feel something of their distress. This is nature helping us to see the world from the baby's point of view – but it also makes it very hard to cope with a constantly grizzling or distraught baby.

You may find that nothing seems to work for long and it's a rare baby who is never left to cry for a little while from time to time. After all, it's your survival your baby needs most. So your baby needs you to look after yourself and to get as much practical help and emotional support as you can from your partner or your family. You may even be lucky enough to have someone who will look after the baby for an hour or two while you have a break.

### Helping your baby to settle down

Try not to get pulled in opposite directions by following too many pieces of advice. Unfortunately there aren't many easy answers. You are the only one who is close enough to begin to understand your baby and to sort out what practical measures might help and also be manageable within your own family.

Trying to see the world from your baby's point of view is a good start. All babies are different.

- Some babies like to be quiet and still and are easily startled and upset by too much going on; other babies are more content if they feel there's a bit of life going on around them.
- Feeding or sucking work like magic for some babies; others find feeding a bit of a fraught time.
- Some babies can go easily from being cuddled to being put down; others seem to think this is the end of the world.

If your baby cries excessively and you simply can't settle them, check with your doctor or health visitor to make sure that there is nothing physically wrong.

If they reassure you that nothing is wrong, try not to feel that your baby must be 'crying for nothing', or that they are a 'bad baby', or that you have failed as a parent. It is an exhausting but common problem that will almost certainly settle in time. Don't be embarrassed by your baby's crying and become isolated.

### Sleeping through the night

It can be very hard when someone says to you 'Is your baby sleeping through the night yet? Mine is!'

Try not to compare your baby with anyone else. It's not a race. It's bad enough being tired, but it's even worse if you feel that not sleeping through is unusual or a sign that something is terribly wrong with your baby or with you.

Babies do not know the difference between night and day at first. During the first three or four months their digestive systems make it difficult for them to go for even six hours at night without a feed. This is even truer for breastfed babies. Most babies under six months old wake up regularly during what an adult would think of as night-time and many parents have broken nights for much longer.

But babies don't only wake because of hunger. They are at the very beginning of their lives and are extremely emotionally dependent on those who care for them. As your baby grows, they learn from experience that you are there when they need you. By giving them this confidence, you help them to begin to settle themselves or to entertain themselves for a bit when they are awake.

### Helping your baby to sleep

If your baby still doesn't seem able to relax and let go of you at night, it's worth thinking about their day. Has it been too stimulating? Has it been so busy or stressful that they haven't had enough peaceful time with you?

Some babies are very self-contained and independent during the day and only seem to realise that they need you at night. It's worth trying to encourage babies like this to enjoy more of your company during the day rather than taking advantage of their independence to get on with other things.

These practical tips might be helpful:

- Try to make sleep-time very peaceful with a familiar pattern to it.
- Allow time for your baby to settle themselves even if they are whimpering, but don't leave a distressed baby to scream if they can't settle or if they have been asleep and have woken up again.
- Talk to the baby very quietly and try to keep a quiet, sleepy atmosphere at night so they learn that this is different from daytime.
- Try to get as much rest as possible whenever the baby is asleep.
- Make the most of any opportunities to enjoy them when they're happy. Memories of those moments will see you through the bad times!

### Helping you to cope

Babies sense your feelings. The best thing for you and your baby is to concentrate on getting to know one another. Giving too much attention to trying to find answers to each problem may be a real barrier to getting to know your baby.

You may try to establish a routine to help you get through the day, but any routine needs to be flexible and realistic and to change as your baby grows. Having routines won't transform your baby's temperament or enable you to have all the answers.

If you or the family are going through a worrying or unhappy time, it may well unsettle your baby so that just when you need

a bit more peace they become miserable and wakeful. It's difficult to protect a baby from family worries but perhaps the problems are ones you could seek help with.

Some people feel low after having a baby. All sorts of feelings and demands which they might ordinarily have managed can overwhelm them. So if your baby seems really inconsolable, perhaps they are sensing your unhappiness.

Many people feel lonely with a new baby and it can be particularly stressful if you are a single parent. Try to make the effort to meet other parents regularly.

During bad patches, you can easily feel that everyone – including your own baby – is criticising you. Sometimes a baby is born following a period of particular sadness, such as the death of a parent, a previous miscarriage, stillbirth or cot death. In these circumstances it may be very difficult for parents to cope with their baby's distress about being put down for the night.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets  
*Postnatal depression*

### Asking for help

Most parents worry because they aren't always as loving and patient as they would like to be. It can be a shock for any parent to discover how resentful they sometimes feel towards their own babies.

Parents sometimes say 'I get so tired and on edge that I worry I may harm my baby'. If you feel that caring for your baby is so overwhelming that you are frequently angry, you may need help.

Accept as much help as you can get. You have no need to think that people will interfere and criticise you for asking for help.

Help might consist of practical assistance and support. It may be a matter of helping parents to think about their children for themselves by trying to understand the worries and unhappiness that can get in the way.

For most people, being a parent is the most rewarding job they will ever do. But it is also the hardest, so you deserve all the support you can get.

### Further help

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

#### Contacts

##### Association for Postnatal Illness

Phone 020 7386 0868 (helpline)  
Web [www.apni.org](http://www.apni.org)

##### Cry-sis

Local support for families with excessively crying, sleeping and demanding babies.  
Helpline 020 7404 5011 (9am to 10pm, 7 days a week)  
[www.cry-sis.org.uk](http://www.cry-sis.org.uk)

##### Meet-a-Mum Association (MAMA)

Support for people suffering from postnatal illness and their families.  
Phone 0845 120 6162  
Web [www.mama.org.uk](http://www.mama.org.uk)

##### National Childbirth Trust

Phone (local rate) 0870 444 8707 (enquiry line)  
Web [www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com](http://www.nctpregnancyandbabycare.com)



##### Sure Start

There are a number of Sure Start programmes in the UK offering services and information for parents and children under four. To find if there is one in your area contact:

Phone 0870 0002288 or contact  
ChildcareLink below  
Web [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk)

##### YoungMinds Parents' Information Service

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person.

Freephone 0800 018 2138  
Web [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

##### Parentline

Help and advice for anyone looking after a child.

Freephone 0808 800 2222  
Web [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

##### ChildcareLink

Information about child care and early years services in your local area.

Freephone 0800 096 0296  
Web [www.childcarelink.gov.uk](http://www.childcarelink.gov.uk)

##### Contact a Family

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Written by Judy Shuttleworth  
© Understanding Childhood Ltd  
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Illustrated by Jan Lewis  
Design by Susan Clarke for Expression, IP23 8HH

Enquiries to:  
The Administrator  
Understanding Childhood  
PO Box 235  
Hythe  
Kent CT21 4WX

e [info@understandingchildhood.net](mailto:info@understandingchildhood.net)  
w [www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

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