***How to help a child with separation anxiety***

First, it’s normal. It’s separation anxiety and to one degree or another, most kids have it at some point. Around 6 months of age, babies begin to realize that things exist even if they can’t see them (it’s why they love “peekaboo”). The downside is babies begin to realize that they’re separate from their parents and that thus they could be abandoned. What they don’t yet have the capacity for, however, is figuring out that you’re likely to come back. It can be pretty scary for them. I’m actually surprised that so many kids just sail through this period, but many do. For those who don’t the following can help:

**When you leave…don’t sneak out.** It’s tempting, and a lot of people do it to save themselves the hassle, but it reinforces the idea that your presence is undependable and you could just disappear at any time – which is what your child’s afraid of. Wave goodbye. Say you’re leaving.

**Prepare him in advance.** He may not understand everything, but does more than you realize. Talk about your plans. Where. When.

**If possible, create some consistency in your leaving**. Though not always possible with those rare nights out; but with work and other predictable partings, try to create a similar scenario so he can help himself prepare through the familiar things that lead up to you heading out the door.

**Set up a fun activity with the sitter that he can be engrossed in when it’s time to leave.** Still follow the above steps, but make your goodbyes brief… hopefully he’ll be back to the game quickly.

And lastly, remember that **learning how to cope is one of the main tasks of childhood.** There are times he will be unhappy and great parenting doesn’t – and shouldn’t - prevent that. Helping him name his feelings, and having empathy for his unhappiness isn’t the same as him learning that being miserable will change what other people do, or is always a tragedy.

Child and Family Therapist

We Care Services for Children