

SEPARATION STRUGGLES

Why do infants become distressed when apart from their parents, and what can early years practitioners do to ease their long journey to independence?

Sarah Ockwell-Smith offers her thoughts...



about the author

Sarah Ockwell-Smith is a mother of four and the bestselling author of *BabyCalm* (Piatkus, 2012, £13.99) and *ToddlerCalm* (Piatkus, 2013, £13.99). Sarah has a background in psychology and has also worked as an antenatal teacher and doula. Sarah offers bespoke training courses for EYFS providers - visit sarahockwell-smith.com for more information.

We live in a society fixated on raising independent children. Best-selling parenting books focus on the importance of

teaching 'self soothing' to babies. New parents are told that they must not create bad habits and must "not spoil" their babies by "holding them too much".

By the time babies are six months-old they are expected to sleep through the night, alone in a cot, in a separate bedroom from their parents. If they don't do this we consider their sleep 'problematic' despite the fact that scientific research tells us that at six months of age 39 per cent of babies wake regularly at night and need parental input in order to go back to sleep, and by nine months old this figure rises to 58 per cent. Why do we expect something of our children that seemingly isn't the norm? Perhaps more intriguingly, why does a baby's sleep regress so significantly at nine months of age? To answer these questions we need to understand two things: the physiological norms of infant behaviour and the development of independence in infancy.

Dependence before independence

When a baby is born its brain is 25 per cent of the size of an adult's; by three years of age it is around 80 per cent of its future size. More important than size alone, though, is the development of the connections, or synapses, in a baby's brain. Synapses act as plugs, like those that join the wires of electrical appliances with live plug sockets. At birth babies have around 2,500 synapses, which increases dramatically to 1,000 trillion synapses by the age of three. In essence, newborns have an awful lot of unplugged sockets, meaning their brain function is extremely primitive; they have all they need to survive but little else.

The lower hemisphere of the baby's brain, the brainstem, is well developed, the cerebral cortex less so. The neocortex, the frontal part of the brain responsible for higher thought processes, including critical, rational and analytical thought, is incredibly underdeveloped. The primitive brain, well developed at birth, is responsible for basic reflexes and homeostasis - regulating temperature, breathing, feelings of hunger and basic emotions such as fear. This insures that babies survive, but their brains are

not well developed enough to be capable of more sophisticated behaviours - for example, manipulation, habit formation or emotional self-regulation. Effectively, the most popular parenting books on the market today, which speak of the importance of teaching a baby to 'self-settle' in order that they learn to be independent, are completely ignorant to rudimentary brain science.

It is not physically possible for children under three to truly self-soothe; the higher parts of their brains responsible for this sophisticated behaviour are too immature. Some babies may naturally be happy on their own and some others may have been trained, through the use of methods such as 'controlled crying' and the like, to not call out for their parents, but this does not mean that they are emotionally 'soothed'. Recent research in America has shown that babies are anything but calm after this sort of training. Investigating cortisol levels, researchers found that on the first two days of controlled crying both parents' and babies' stress hormones

under 2s

SECURE ATTACHMENT

World War Two taught us much about the importance of attachment, with psychologists John Bowlby and Renee Spitz focusing on the effects of separating parents and infants, through hospitalisation, evacuation or becoming orphaned. Their findings taught us that attachment was as important to the child as food and water; without attachment the children did not thrive. Bowlby's advice was that, "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment", describing the need for the child to have a "secure base" from which to explore the world. Children's dependence on their parent is the root of future independence.

Bowlby's work was continued by

psychologist Mary Ainsworth, famous for her 'Strange Situation' experiment, which classified healthy attachment styles, as well as those that were undesirable. A young child who is "securely attached" shows great distress at being left alone with a stranger and calms only when the parent returns. Far from being a response that should distress parents, Ainsworth shows us that in fact separation anxiety is psychologically desirable, for it highlights an infant that is well attached to her parents. This secure attachment is an incredibly strong predictor for an independent, healthy and happy future adult, capable of forming satisfying relationships in later life. The shallow 'self-soothing' ideas of many of today's experts completely disregard the work of these eminent psychologists.

remained high; however, by day three - usually when a baby stops crying - whilst parents' stress levels dropped to normal, the babies' remained as elevated as they were on the first two days. They did not cry because they had learned to be helpless - why cry if nobody comes? They had not learned to be independent, but to do what it takes to survive, nothing more.

These ideas are not just applicable to babies' sleep; being mindful of babies' neurological development applies to every facet of their lives, whether awake or asleep. It is possible to train a baby to not cry for their parents, but this does not illustrate they have soothed themselves. Independence is a sophisticated skill that develops gradually over the first five years of life.

The most important thing to understand is that before independence there must always be dependence. Science very clearly tells us that the best way to grow children with well-connected brains is to allow them to attach to known caregivers in their early years. When this is allowed to happen, synapses form in the brain that allow it to develop in such a way that in future years the emergence of true independence is most likely.

Understanding and reassurance

Separation anxiety is normal and common, particularly from 9-18 months, due to children's new understanding that they are separate entities to their parents, combined with their lack of temporal awareness and a grasp of the idea that their parents will come back for them. Ironically this is the time most children find themselves in childcare for the first time. It is incredibly distressing for parents to see their baby upset at each drop off, often leaving them wondering what they have done wrong to create such a clingy, dependent child. It is vital, however, that they are reassured that they have done absolutely nothing wrong. In fact they have done everything right! Their baby has a normal and very healthy attachment with them. The parents should be congratulated for having allowed their baby to form the bond that they need, in order for their brain to connect in the most positive

With time and plenty of **planning** babies can form strong **attachments** to their key persons, which is the most desirable way to cope with **separation** anxiety

ways and can be reassured that this normal developmental stage will not last forever.

For most children separation anxiety dramatically reduces by the time they are three and their brain is more mature. Until then what they need is lots of understanding and reassurance. With time and plenty of planning babies can form strong attachments to their key persons, which is the most desirable way to cope with such separation anxiety - for both babies and parents.

When we treat a baby with separation

anxiety with respect, empathy and reassurance then we play a part in helping them to become independent in the future - when they are developmentally ready. As American author Hodding Carter famously said, "There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings". But we cannot force those wings unless the roots, of attachment, are there first. When we allow a child to attach, we are giving them the best chance of flying in the future.

