

Separation chaos



The drop-off every morning can be a traumatic experience for parents – but sometimes their inability to let go can cause problems for everyone, says **Paul Dix...**



Dante has separation anxiety. At least that's what Mum says. In the daily chaos of tears, cuddles, tears, more cuddles and grabbing each other for dear life, there certainly appears to be a problem. Despite your carefully crafted routine, Dante's mum finds her way around the parent's cordon and into the room. While other parents are gritting teeth and walking away (without looking back), Dante's mum is plumping cushions and settling in to the book corner. Other children and their parents are confused by the different rules that seem to be operating. This cannot continue – you suspect that Dante is suffering by proxy and it is Mum who has separation anxiety...

How do you respond?

A Tighten the cordon – ensure that Dante's mum cannot enter the room when she drops him off. Reinforce the agreed routine for all parents, post up extra signage and impose a new routine for the morning.

B Mum talk – it is now time to sit down with Mum and gently explain the impact of her behaviour on Dante.

C A job for Dante – change the morning routine with Dante by giving him extra responsibility for setting up the room for the first activity.

The consequences

A Tighten the cordon
The gate, entry door and rope across the classroom door are more than enough to reinforce the message to most parents. However, you create some new signs that gently remind everyone about good drop off routines. To accompany the new signage you replace the rope with a stair gate across the bottom

of the door, and curtain off the door for good measure. The new look is a little over the top, but you're sure that you have blocked Dante's mum's access to the classroom. This environmental change should help her separate from Dante before he comes into the room. It will also mean she cannot sneak into the book corner, and the hard stares from other parents might subside. Satisfied by your handiwork you await the arrival of the children.

Dante arrives, late. Mum ignores every sign, vaults the barricades, flings the curtain aside and spends 15 minutes upsetting Dante and the rest of the children. The following morning things are no better. While speaking to another child you turn your back, only to discover Dante's mum has slipped past and is arranging cushions and settling down in the book corner. It seems that you have not solved the problem but have simply made the game more challenging.

Talking behaviour

- *Dante's mum's behaviour is certainly irritating, but are there safeguarding issues with her uninvited entry into the room?*
- *How do you explain the new physical barriers and signage to the rest of the parents?*
- *Can you put a curtain up to hide the room from the parents, or do you think that is a step too far?*

Meet with Mum

Meeting with Mum is not something that you are looking forward to. Dante's mum is a forceful character, and with three other children she has far more experience with parenting than you do. Knowing this, you prepare for the meeting well and note down three clear messages that you want to say to her. The meeting starts well and she listens to your appeal to follow the drop-off routine, not to enter the classroom and to let the staff deal with Dante if he is upset.

As soon as you finish speaking, however, it's clear that she has heard nothing. She has been waiting for her opportunity to speak. She has brought you some articles on separation anxiety and details the involvement of the GP. She will not countenance the idea that her behaviour is in any way contributing to Dante's 'difficulties'. In fact, even as you suggest it you realise that it was the wrong thing to say. She becomes defensive, and before the

meeting disintegrates you call a halt to it. This is not the outcome you planned for, and you suspect that Mrs Dante now thinks that she has got you onside.

Talking behaviour

- *Would it be appropriate to have a colleague in the meeting with Dante's mum to support you?*
- *Is it wrong for you to assume that Dante's difficulties are created by mum? Might there be more complex issues that you are not aware of?*
- *Is it your place to challenge a parent about their parenting choices?*

Work with Dante

Dante is a lovely boy and although he struggles with the morning chaos he does settle well. Dante becomes more anxious as pick-up time draws near but spends 95 per cent of his time happy, involved and helpful. You explain the new job to Dante and he looks interested. As you show him what needs to be put out and where it needs to go, he asks if a friend can help. This seems like a good development and Chelsea is enlisted. To reinforce the importance of this new job you give each of them an armband to wear while they are working (you will use the same armbands for other children who have jobs later in the day).

As Dante arrives the following morning you can hear him explaining his new job to Mum. He's excited and keen to get on. Stopping at the door he tells Mum that she has to go now as he has "a special job to do". As she is once again attempting to sneak into the classroom, Chelsea cuts her off, whisking Dante away to the back of the room. This gives you a chance to hold the line and casually observe how happy he is today. You know that you have only won a small battle but it's a sure step on the road to winning the war. It will take time to convince Mum that he can self-manage the separation, for her to realise that Dante can be happy without her being there.

Talking Behaviour

- *Will you need to change the job/routine to keep Dante as enthusiastic?*
- *How can you make this arrangement fair to the other children when they all would like to do special jobs?*
- *How can you get Mum to support the new responsibility that Dante has?*

find out more

If you want to learn outstanding behaviour practice for yourself, have a look at Paul's Online Behaviour Management Course for early years practitioners and nursery nurses at pivotaleducation.com/online-courses-resources. Join the conversation on Twitter @PivotalPaul

Which approach did you use?

YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE

Barricade the doors!

Sometimes changing the environment does cause an immediate change in behaviour. Parents' behaviours are more tricky, however. Dante's mum has a single focus in the morning, and even though your signs are engaging and your barricades tight, they prove no discouragement for a mother hell bent on that last cuddle of the morning. Meanwhile, the other parents are slowly realising that this is all for the 'benefit' of Dante's mum. As the whispering begins you realise that changing behaviour needs a more creative approach.

YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE

Hard talking

Setting up meetings with parents is always a difficult decision. Regardless of how well you plan, they can and do go wrong. You don't have enough information to make a call on whether Dante has a specific diagnosable condition, yet the meeting seems predicated on this. Perhaps gathering more information before the meeting might help; perhaps sitting down with Mum with no agenda might be a better way to build trust before you start telling her how to parent her child.

YOUR BEHAVIOUR STYLE

Divert and rule

Your greatest asset is Dante's enthusiasm for nursery and for his friends. Without challenging Mum directly you have the opportunity to show her that Dante can be independent and still be happy. The double distraction of Chelsea and the hallowed armband will not be enough to tempt Dante away every time but it's a great start. Now, what other jobs can you invent to make the rest of the children feel important?

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