

Healthy attachment, easier separation

By Jeanine Beukes M.A Clin Psych

The healthier the attachment, the easier the later separation and the greater your child's independence and sense of self-confidence. The earlier the periods of separation from the mother or primary caretaker, the greater the chance of traumatic separations later.

A few years ago a prominent airline featured a picture of mom and dad setting off to board an aircraft, leaving behind their crying baby – the caption read: 'If you need a break, fly with us.'

How often have we, as parents, fantasised about fleeing from our little bundle of screaming demands into a place where calm, order and indulgence reigns? However, that's all it can be in those early months, just a fantasy, before our adult selves kick in again and we're walking up and down the corridor soothing a troubled tummy, rocking the baby to sleep, and grabbing blissful moments of peace before we're again summonsed by our baby.

To explicitly encourage people to act on their fleeing fantasy (particularly one we can so easily identify with) is without doubt inflicting damage to our infant's mental health. The airline was contacted and the advertisement withdrawn.

Separation

Consider how we, as adults, cope when a loved one goes away. We sense that something doesn't feel right and our minds wander to our loved one.

We can conjure a picture of what he looks like, remember how he sounds and smells, we can even hear him and know how he feels. While it's not the same as being in his arms, it's enough to soothe the longing until he returns – even if it's a long separation. As adults, we can manage without undue distress but an infant has no such advantage.

When parents leave their babies sight, they're gone – totally. Your infant has no mental ability to recall you in his memory. He cannot conjure up a picture of you to compensate for your absence. This capacity develops as the child grows, it is not innate.

You are either concretely present or absent – period. Should you need to leave for a short while, and he is left in the care of a familiar caretaker, he will recognise you on your return and be responsive to you. However, if your absence is prolonged (more than seven to 10 days), the chances are strong that all will not be as it was before. Your baby can react in various ways as to what feels to him like the permanent loss of you. To ensure their survival, infants will mourn the loss of a loved one, go through a process of grieving, and then reach out toward a new connection.



While reactions vary from one baby to another, your baby might appear detached and show no signs of recognition on your return. Your baby could treat you like a stranger on one hand and be excessively clingy on the other. Gradually, he can be 'won back' but any subsequent separation, even just 10 to 20 minutes, could precipitate great distress for your infant as he has no way of knowing how long you will be away for this time. For him, any separation now feels unbearable. He has no sense of time, only the clear association of your absence with a sense of great loss.

Jenny's story

Jenny's father died when she was a few months old. After her initial grief, Jenny's mom was determined to carve out a new life for herself and remarried when Jenny was 18 months old. A wedding without a honeymoon was unthinkable for this new couple, and Jenny was left behind for two weeks.

While you could sympathise with Jenny's mother over her loss, and commend her for embracing life again, the honeymoon was celebrated at great cost to Jenny's psychological health.

Already vulnerable from her early trauma, Jenny then faced losing her mother at a time when she was just becoming mobile, moving around and discovering the world. She was the one who needed to do the exploring, in the safe knowledge that her mom would still be there when she returned from exploring the garden.

When her mother returned from honeymoon, Jenny was excessively clingy and screamed whenever her mom left the room. The couple's honeymoon bliss was short-lived as mom struggled to calm her anxious demanding girl. Jenny got distressed when left with a babysitter and evenings out became fraught because they were preceded by tears and screaming.

A year later Jenny struggled to separate from her mom at playschool. When she reached Grade 1, she simply refused to stay at school and would walk home. School camps and sleeping out still present a problem, even though Jenny is now a teenager.

For Jenny to be fully equipped to separate from her mother and independently explore the world as a little girl, she needed a secure, consistent attachment to her in the first two years. These would have formed the springboard from which she could leave the nest with confidence.

Paradoxically, the healthier the attachment, the easier the later separation and the greater your child's independence and sense of self-confidence. The earlier the periods of separation from the mother or primary caretaker, the greater the chance of traumatic separations later.

Basic requirements

From birth, a baby is equipped with vocal equipment designed to instantly summons you to his side. An infant needs his mother's presence, her closeness, her touch, her smell and her voice. In fact, when a baby is born he will recognise his mother's voice and respond to it in preference to any other as he's heard it in utero many thousands of times. So, having latched onto his mother, this baby will need her continuous presence to feel safe and secure.

Continuity and consistency are the key factors. If mom is the primary caretaker, then she is fundamentally non-replaceable in those early days. Fathers can and will bond with their infants and that primary position can be interchangeable, provided they are also spending enough time with their babies. However, in the early days, the father's role is often one of support to the mother, assuring her security and well-being so that she can pass this on to their baby. Similarly, granny – that invaluable source of support and advice – is best directed towards nurturing her own daughter/daughter-in-law.

A mother who feels secure and safe will be able to direct her energies towards 'reading' her baby's needs and becoming attuned to him. Similarly, a baby whose needs are consistently attended to – who feels his mom's presence more than her absence – develops a sense of himself as a powerful and important little person in this big world. ☺

Jeanine Beukes is a clinical psychologist with 31 years' experience in private practice and has a special interest in the new parent-infant 'couple'. She has studied both locally and abroad, and has a psychoanalytic practice in Rondebosch. She has presented various papers at psychology conferences, and has published articles about moms at risk. She is currently extending her work to include nannies co-parenting alongside parents. Honouring mothers and mothering/parenting is the cornerstone of her work. Jeanine is a mother of three. To contact Jeanine, email jeaninebeukes@telkomsa.net.

