



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Toddlers Becoming Afraid of Separations

Toddlers sometimes seem to suddenly develop an anxiety about separation. We frequently counsel parents at the Lucy Daniels Center about this situation. The following is a question that we received that illustrates this type of situation:

My husband and I wonder if we used a good approach with our son, Timmy, who is 18 months old. We have left Timmy with baby-sitters since he was an infant. He would fuss a bit when we left but would soon brighten. Our baby-sitters always reported good evenings and easy transitions to bed. However, one evening three months ago, Timmy howled pathetically when we left him with a favorite baby-sitter. He remained fussy through the evening and was still awake and clung to me when we returned at 11 p.m. Although we worried that we might be causing a problem by indulging him, we decided not to use a baby-sitter again until we felt comfortable again. It just seemed like there must be some reason for his being so upset. I began paying attention and noted many other ways in which Timmy was having new trouble with separations. For example, he was reluctant to play by himself, insisting that I stay with him, and even keep looking at him. I tried to accommodate him when possible, but continued to expect as much from him as I thought he was capable of. I must say that I got pretty frustrated with his clinging. Gradually, he began to play and explore by himself with his old zest. I also noticed that he is beginning to showing signs of temper and defiance for the first time. We just tried a babysitter again — and it went great! Did we handle this situation sensibly?

The following is our answer to this mother that also explains our understanding of this type of situation. We said, "Indeed, you handled this situation well. You sensitively responded to an important developmental challenge that children routinely experience around 15 to 18 months. This period of time is so important that it has a name: the rapprochement stage. During this phase, parents are often perplexed by the fact that their child seeks a level of involvement with them that he or she had apparently outgrown. Of course, you were frustrated — children try their mother's patience during these days.

We will discuss the difference between a child's outward behavior and his inner development during the rapprochement stage, because understanding this distinction will help you understand Timmy's behavior.

Distinguishing outward behavior and inner development: The loss of previously attained capacities and abilities is the hallmark of a child's rapprochement phase outward behavior. Such a loss is what is meant by the term regression. A child's regression during this phase can be so extreme that he or she may need mother around all the time. For example, the venturing-off toddler may repeatedly run back to mother for a hug or to show the latest treasure.

Although rapprochement phase children regress in outer behavior, they simultaneously are progressing in their inner development. They begin to think about their world in a new way, discovering that they are actually emotionally separate from the person whom they had previously felt fully at one with — usually their mother. Children are exhilarated by their realization that they are separate and autonomous. However, they are also frightened by the implications of their insight: They are alone with themselves. Their world becomes less magical as they progress beyond experiencing their mothers as always being with them, protecting, helping, and soothing. Children feeling more on their own emotionally, experience the painful feeling of loneliness for the first time.

One illustration of the rapprochement phase is provided by the common observation that 18-month-old children who get hurt may cry louder than 14-month-old children with comparable hurts. The younger children feel invulnerable because they believe that their mother's protectiveness travels

with them, but the 18-month-old children know better. They understand that they, with their limited capacities, must take responsibility to protect themselves. Their cry combines both pain and anxiety that it is possible to be hurt or injured.

The relationship between behavior and inner development:

Emotionally stressed children invariably regress, whatever the source of stress. This kind of regression occurs as a result of the stress of the rapprochement phase, and explains why children appear to be taking a step backwards when they are actually taking an exciting step forward. Children, afraid of their new autonomy, seek a temporary return to a level of dependency and desire for the kinds of parental support that they hadn't needed for many months — or perhaps never needed in quite the way they do now.

Dreams as windows into early ways of experiencing: Does the idea that children must learn that their mind is separate from their mother's mind seem odd to you? It is impossible for adult minds to re-capture the way the world felt before their own rapprochement phases. It may help if you think about experiences in dreams where barriers and separations between people don't exist. For example, a person can know the thoughts of another, and a person can mix the features of many people in impossible combinations, as if even physical barriers didn't exist. The emotional logic of dreams re-captures the pre-rapprochement's child's belief about what the world and relationships are.

You probably didn't know these details about child development when you made your decision to support Timmy throughout his new stage of separation anxiety, but you obviously didn't need to. The important thing is that you trusted Timmy and stayed in emotional contact with him. Your compassion and belief that your child was communicating a need was so much more helpful as a guide than had you emotionally distanced or objectified his behavior by saying: "He's just is trying to get attention," or "He's just trying to get away with something or trying to control us." Those statements rarely capture the reality of what your child is trying to communicate with regressive behavior. Children manipulate, but they do so out of need or sometimes desperation. You responded with just the right touch — meeting the regression halfway by accepting it as temporarily necessary while slowly

raising your expectations back to the old levels. With such an approach, children can be helped to grow through the rapprochement stage by learning the essential lesson that, although the absolute security provided by magic is gone, they continue to be safe because they have their own resources and parents who will be there to help when needed. With this independence and confidence, children are well positioned to continue to develop their new independent selves through the self-definition achieved through the defiance and opposition that they usually begin to exert as they move beyond the rapprochement phase.”