

HELPING KIDS COPE WITH SEPARATION

- **Introduce the concept of separation early.** Before you must leave your child and ideally before you must discuss a separation, read your child age-appropriate stories about separation.
- **Provide detailed information.** When you tell your child about the trip you or the child will be taking or some other separation (such as a hospital stay), provide specific information well in advance. Tell your child exactly what will happen: when you will leave, who will take care of her or him, how you will keep in contact, and when you will be back. Remind the child that you have gone away before (for an afternoon, an entire day, an evening and possibly even an overnight trip) and that you have always come back.
- **Acknowledge your child's feelings.** When your child expresses distress, acknowledge and name her or his feelings. For example, you might say, "I can see that you feel sad when you think about me being away." Appropriately acknowledge your own feelings, too: you might say, "I'll miss you, too."
- **Model coping.** "I'll miss you, but I'll keep you in my heart," and "I'll be sad that we're apart, but I'll be happy to see you again when I come home" are appropriate ways to express your feelings and suggest coping strategies for your child.
- **Introduce the caregiver early.** Make sure that your child knows the person who will be caring for him or her before you leave. The child should spend time together with you and the caregiver before you leave.
- **Provide comforting objects.** Make sure the child has a favorite stuffed animal or blanket, or a picture of the two of you together. Your child might find it comforting to keep something of yours, or for you to take one of her or his small stuffed animals or another possession with you.
- **Stay connected.** Use all available methods to maintain a connection while you're away. You might talk on the phone or use a webcam, leave recordings of yourself reading a story for the child, or send postcards or e-mail. (If you've taken one of the child's stuffed animals with you, you might photograph the toy in your surroundings and e-mail those photos to your child.)
- **Create a countdown to your return.** Make a calendar to show your child when you're leaving and when you'll be back. Explain, in a developmentally appropriate way, that each box represents a day ("Here is today, here is tomorrow," and so on.) At bedtime, the caregiver should help the child check off each day.



- **Have your child record what's happened.** The caregiver can help your child draw or write about things that happen when you're away, making a journal to give you when you return. Your child could also compile pictures that are taken while you're away of the child's activities (making cookies, visiting the zoo).
- **Have your child make something to celebrate your return.** This could be a gift for you or something related to what the child did during your absence.
- **Make plans for your return.** If possible, before the separation, talk about what you and the child will do when you're together again. Even something simple like, "When I come home on Friday night, we'll have pizza for dinner" can help give a child something to anticipate. Children may also want to participate in planning a reunion.