

THE RESILIENT KID PODCAST

Season 2 – Episode 3

Separation Anxiety

Hello, and welcome back to the Resilient Kid podcast with me, Ashley Costello, psychotherapist of over 25 years. Hello, how are you? So, I'm recording this on Valentine's Day. Sending lots of love to you and your family, wherever you're listening to in the world. So today is a bit of a big topic for me because I probably have three Yeah, three clients at the moment who are struggling with separation anxiety and all various ages.

So we've got one of three, one that is kind of eight and then one that's 11, which is and you can get this much older as well, like much, much older. So I just thought it was really. Really interesting that it's kind of coming up a lot at the moment and for families and also what can we do about it?

So yes, so that's why we're hitting separation anxiety today. So what is it? What is separation anxiety? Well, it's the, it's when we. When children have that fear about becoming separate to you. Now, below the age of two, they don't see themselves as separate. So there's a really famous psychology experiment that if you put If you have a toddler and you look in a mirror together, the mom and the toddler, and you put, say you just draw some lipstick on the end of their, on the end of their nose, they will point to you because they don't see themselves as separate yet.

So it's quite funny, isn't it? It's how sometimes we handle that transition where they see themselves as a separate entity. Sometimes it just develops and actually. It isn't always that they're separate to you because there'll be times that they're happy as Larry with somebody else. It's their felt sense of separation.

So I talk about the brain a lot on here, and our brain doesn't know the difference between real and imaginary. So if we are thinking around that, think about. What we feel is separation or what the kids feel they're separate to actually what it is. So, why, why do we have this? Well, survival. It is literally survival.

So, our brain. Will try and get us back to the side of the person who keeps us the safest. It's herd mentality. It's how we have survived since cave times. So you can see when they feel separated, why the brain would want to do anything and everything, cry, kick out, punch, have a tantrum, does not matter.

But the brain is saying, you need to get me back there with this safe person. That is the only way I'm going to survive and I'm saving your life. Now that could be nursery, school, college, it could be anything. So you think about the brain is trying to save their life. That's all it's trying to do, but when you're outside one of those education establishments and they are kicking off It's really hard to remember that, isn't it?

So, What causes it? Well, it really is about that There's kind of two real reasons. One is the felt sense of closeness to that safe person. Now that can be mum, dad, nana, doesn't matter, it's that closeness. Now it is often mum, often mum, not always, but often mum. And let me tell you, it is nothing to do with how much you love them or how much they feel that you love them.

It's nothing to do that. So take the guilt out of the window. Okay, because as we come on to what we can do about it. I don't want you to think this is a sign or when you leave them at the school gate or hand them over to a nursery practitioner that they think you don't love them. They might say that to you because the brain will do anything to get you back, but it is not to do with that.

So leave that guilt at home. And also, it's the, it's the void that they, that they feel as well, the void of that, unless we handed them over to somebody else who is equally safe or near, near equal to you in, in them, helping them feel safe. So that's kind of why it comes and it's just a basic mammal, human need. You look at mammals, they're in pods, they're in you know, packs.

It is how we survive.

Now, what is it that we see? How do we see this every day? Like, literally every day. Well, it might be they have difficulty being away from you. It, they might have kind of worries around what is going to happen to you. So I once had a young person who every time his mom dropped him somewhere at like after school activity and she, you know, either would go for a run or she would go in a car.

He would obsess about she's going to get run over. What if she has a car crash? What if she doesn't come back for me? You know, and it's that kind of catastrophizing. So we have to, you know, we have to talk to that sometimes. Sometimes it's difficulty in leaving the house or going to school, things like that, even friends, houses, parties.

The symptoms can just flare up and actually sometimes the house is the safe place and you are often there with them. They're very rarely left alone. So, you know, that's why the house becomes the thing. Difficulty sleeping, lots of worries and anxiety running around the head feeling physically sick or ill when away from their safe person and we're going to come back to that in a moment because I think even if your child doesn't struggle with separation anxiety, this is something that I kind of explained to one of my parents this week.

And they were like, oh, my God, I didn't realize. So, so I think it's important. So we'll come back to that in a sec. The other one is also worry about danger to themselves. And again, we're going to look at this in more detail.

So just returning to that physical illness of how they, how they feel when a child has that felt sense of anxiety, then they will go into fight and flight. So fight. Is that kind of anger tantrum fight is that avoidance don't want to go to school refusal to do something refusal to leave or stay somewhere.

No, I don't want to go to that party, et cetera. And then freeze is like, whether, you know, nervous system just shuts down completely shuts down and we act, you know, there's a lot of times that we will naturally go into fight or freeze. Okay, so we do this when things feel scary, when they feel dangerous, when we don't feel safe.

So you imagine, I'll just give you an example. You're in a really busy shop and you have got a toddler with you. Imagine they're not your toddler for a second. And you're looking after this little person and they go missing.

That cold sweat that comes over you. The, oh my God, what's going to happen? The, what if somebody's got them? What if they've left? What if I can't find them? What am I going to tell their parents? All of them. Then the, immediate, you know, that after that immediate panic and that, oh my God, what if, then you're going into that heart racing, I need help.

And you're bringing everyone around you to try and help. And you could become hysterical that is separation anxiety for your child, that feeling of panic, feeling sick, needing other people. Getting the herd back around us to make us feel safe to solve this problem. That is how your little person, however, however little or big they are.

That's what it feels like when you lose a kid in a supermarket. That is exactly the nearest thing that I can tell you that they experience. And we have gone into that fight, fight and freeze immediately. Like there is no, there is no kind of calming you down really until you see them again. Until you know they're safe.

Until you know you're not going to have to make the phone call to their mum to go, I've lost your kid. I don't know where she is. Or he. So that's the example of it. Now, what we want to do is, and I'm going to put this kind of little banner up to give us a real idea, is, you've all read the story about going on a bear hunt.

You can't go round it; you can't go over it. just got to get through it. And I think the, the author of Bear Hunt is such an amazing, so, so amazing to recognize this. That there is lots of things in life that we just have to get through. Grief is one of them, you know, hard things. Yep, we have just got to get through it.

And when we avoid it, when we try to go around, when we allow them to go around this really horrible, hard feeling, we are doing them a disservice. We are taking away the opportunity for it, A, for them to learn, and B, for it to get better, and get better for us too. Now, am I saying we just rip the band aid off?

Absolutely not. Absolutely not. We do not have to do that. But we can look at our language, we can look at how we handle it, and we can put things into place to make it easier for them rather than harder.

So, how do we do this? Well, we ask ourselves, and we start to use the language that we want them to learn.

Is this a scary situation? Is it a dangerous situation? Or is it a hard one? Is it where there's going to be change? Is it a new thing? All right, so let's have a look at the situation first and try and categorize. Now if it's a dangerous situation, we're not going to put them in it. We're not going to let them be on their own there.

However, remembering the brain doesn't know the difference between real and imaginary. Then why, then it, we have to think about going back to their felt separation. Is it perceived danger? And talk to that part. Now, for the most part, it will be hard. It will be a new situation. It might be a change. Will they still be safe?

Yes. So we need to talk to that safety. So things like, is this a situation that is dangerous? Or do I feel like this because it's dangerous? Or do I feel like this because I need to be brave? Can you see the two there? Now, we have to talk to that anxiety. Anybody who heard the podcast last week, know that I had little Gracie Barry on, 11-year-old author, how amazing, and her mum Lisa.

And, she drew anxiety as a character called Jeff and she talked about how anxiety left a feeling. And sometimes even when she's on a happy day, left that like residue of worry that would be low level. And then there was days that it was high level, but I think her and brilliant book, go out and get it.

If any of your kids struggle, but that naming our anxiety, turning it into an ally. instead of an enemy is really, really good. Now, we have to drive a story to change the response. Let me give you an example. If the story is, when my mum goes away with work, I'm upset. I feel scared. I don't like it. Then that is the story that is being told to the brain.

That is the story of I am not safe. Now, you're not going to go to work and leave them at home. You're going to leave them with a safe, trusted, that could be a partner. That could be a friend, that could be a grandparent, that's with a safe, trusted parent. So, we need to change that story, so that that felt separation, that anxiety,

that part of our brain, the amygdala. That runs the fight and flight mechanism. We need to change that. So, how do we do that? Well, one, we can talk to it. You know, the, I would recommend anybody sit, draw out, draw out your anxiety monster. Stare it in the face. You know, get the kids to, to talk to it. And thinking about really recognising that as, as, as an entity in itself

own right in a character in it, in their story will really help. Now, obviously this depends on their age, but you can do this from quite young. And then let's really talk around Karen Sigmund, who's an Australian psychiatrist, psychologist is really brilliant. And she, she uses the analogy of a smoke alarm.

The amygdala, the fight and flight part of our brain goes off when we're not safe. But like a smoke alarm, there is times when we've just burnt toast. There's no fire. We've just burnt the toast. And so it will still go off in exactly the same way. It will still sound that alarm and everything in our body will Release those super fuel of adrenaline cortisol for lots of hormones, stress hormones that will release to allow us to fight flight or freeze.

So when we talk to kids about maybe use that analogy of a smoke alarm, get them to write, you know, draw their character and talk to this time. Is this. Is this safe? Am I safe? You know, am I feeling like this because it's dangerous? Or am I feeling like this because I need to be brave? Just to go back to that physical bit that I said I would return to while we're here.

The

whole physiology of, you know, the heart, the breathing, is the, the fidgeting, the hyper, there's almost all of that. Is because the stress hormones that super fuel that as humans, we have, that means that we survive as a species

is real for them. Like it's, it's just because the alarm is going off does not mean say it's broken. It means that it is working. However, it's working in the wrong direction. So we have to teach our amygdala that there are certain situations that we are safe in. And we're going to come on to that, but once those stress hormones, that super fuel as we, we talked to it with kids is there, it can physically hurt them.

So what I mean by this is that those views can sit in the tummy and the muscles of the, the gastrointestinal contract and that can really hurt and it's horrible and we get this, don't we, on a Sunday night quite often when they're thinking about school and they don't want to go to school, they're worried about school or you say you know, I'm going away for the night or I'm not going to be able to pick you up from school today.

And that starts. It starts and that physically hurts. It physically hurts because it's sat there and all these super fuels are not doing anything that we are not running like we would have in cave times. So it is sat there. So there's a couple of things that you can do. And this happens with anxiety, not just separation anxiety.

So yoga is a really good one to disperse that. Things like the boat pose. Think about row, row, row your boat. That disperses it, downward dog helps it if you're

doing downward dog as well. You can get them to say the story out loud at the worries out loud and then get them to change it. So change the narrative to a more positive one, and it will change the perspective in the brain.

Now I use this with every age. I've just used it with six former who was having continual nightmares and it was nightmare on a theme. So as they're upside down. And they're saying this out loud. I'm asking them to change certain aspects to make it funny. And what happens is there is a tiny little bit of our spinal fluid who comes in and washes that plaque, that debris from our brain and changes our perspective on something.

So you can use that kind of pose to help with this. Yeah. Dolphin pose. Which is like dog pose, but you put your arms flat and they say, I can't do it on the, on the video, but if you put your arms flat on the floor and your bum is still in the air and you rock forward and back, and that really helps disperse it as well.

A bath. getting outside in nature for a walk. If you, if you're struggling wrists under cold water in the bathroom, if that's a quick one, if you've got access to a bathroom, that's really good one to just help calm down that super food, super food, super fuel. in the tummy that really you know, really helps to just disperse them so it doesn't hurt as much.

Okay, so what do we do to help? What do we do when, you know, there's anger, there's big tears? Well, one, we can recruit somebody. So if it's at school, recruit, excuse me, Voice is going needed water, sorry. You can recruit somebody. So, for instance when I used to be in Abu Dhabi, I was the educational leader of a, of a nursery and we used to, we, I used to take the baby room and what we would do is always made sure that that baby, that little person coming in would always see the same person every single time.

And we would give that, that practitioner time to just bond, to be with, to build the relationship up so that when mum or dad came to handover, they had their safe person already at nursery. You can do that at school, you can get, you know, a TA. A teacher to meet at the gates and, you know, physically hold hands.

And if you do that, big up that teacher, big up that practitioner. Aren't they lovely? Did you know they've got a dog like us? Do you know they've got children? So you're talking about. A bit like when they make friends and you're talking about

what you've got in common, you're talking about how much you like them because if you like them, they know you think they're a safe person.

It all helps to build that narrative of they are safe without you. It all builds that story that they are also a safe person because our brain needs to hear that when we're anxious, when we're worried about being separate, when we have that felt sense of separation. So that's one thing you can do. Bring in somebody else that helps you.

You can look at things like you know, I sometimes draw a little heart on the hand of the little person and mom, and then you can kiss that during the day, or you can fill it with, you know, fill it with love. Pebble obviously depends on the age and stuff. Pebble, teddy, you know, you can one of the things.

That that I recommended the other day was to mum was going out to work. She was, she works in the evening. She was going out to work. The little girl was with dad and safe and okay, but really panicky that mum wasn't going to be in because this was returning to work after being off for a little while.

And I said. Put a teddy, get, get her to put a teddy outside of the room and then when you come in at night, you're going to pop it in bed with her. So when she wakes up, she knows you've been in on to check because it's no good just saying, I'll go in and check. They want proof, you know, they want proof that you've been in things like getting little hearts or little post it notes and saying, I've checked on you.

And, and pop them before you go to bed, you know, you can put, you can put a pile of them there before you go to bed, you don't have to keep getting up and checking them, but when they wake up in the morning, oh, look, you know, and I need to reiterate. This isn't because they think you don't love them.

They might say that, but it is not how loved they feel. It is how safe they feel. And that really sometimes has nothing to do with you. That is sometimes just that felt sense of separation. Now, I said to you, we're going to go on a bear hunt and I'm going to return to this. The biggest thing that we can do, and let me just say this to you, Parents, Adults do not cause the anxiety, but we can catch it.

We can catch it before it starts. We can catch it midway and help them back. We do not cause it. Don't pick up that bag of guilt. You do not cause it. So, however,

when we make accommodations to avoid it, we're not helping them. We're not giving them. The opportunity to learn

when we think about babies are born with this attachment system for their survival. We, I think we're the, I might be wrong in this. I'm not a biologist, but I think we're the only mammals who are vulnerable and defensive. When we are born, most mammals get up and walk or swim and they're gone with their adults.

We have this alarm system to make the grown-up person, the adult in our life, remember us. Bond with us, take care of us. That's why we cry when we're babies. That's why we you know, cry when we're hungry. We have this alarm system that bonds that parent to us to make sure we survive. Because if they walk away, we won't survive.

So that's where the attachment comes from.

It is natural and normal to be irritated when this alarm goes off and there's no need. Okay. It is normal. However, what I'm going to ask you is dig deep. And get the patience going.

Things like quick, confident goodbyes at the gate, at the nursery door. You know, what I used to say is, come in, you give a kiss, you go. Do not hang around, do not let them see you. Because of two reasons. One, if they say you, they're never going to settle. And two, they're never going to bond with that new person.

If they've got you in their eyesight and Virginia Hills who's a nutritionist friend of mine, who is amazing. She actually, I had both of her kids and I know she would know each other from Abu Dhabi. If you need a nutritionist, go to her. She's absolutely amazing. In fact, I'll put her details in the show notes that she helps with lots and lots of things.

And she's really brilliant. You know, we used to have that. With, with her kids and they are amazing kids and it was, you know, and it's that worry and that guilt and, and, oh my God, am I doing the right thing, especially if we're returning to work? It's, it's horrible feeling, but actually. The job of the person at nursery or at school is to develop that relationship.

So give them an opportunity to do that and quick, confident goodbye means that the nervous system will quickly get into the pace that actually this is okay. I'm okay here. It's a situation I need to be brave, not scared. When we

try and do an avoid, try and do a work around, and let's face it, we're talking about the, you know, when they're babies, everything in them is to attach to us for them to survive. We feel, we feel the same, you know, we feel the same, but we need to be the one that changes that system. Okay, so always make sure that they are with someone they feel safe with.

Tell them that you're going to miss them just as much, but talk about giving them an opportunity to be brave. We need to change our behavior. Not our response. We need to talk to them and tell them this is hard. Tell them this is hard, but that they can do it. They can be brave. Now, one of the, one of the I've seen quite a few people who just disappear.

So if they're babysitting, they've just gone. There's no goodbye. The drop 'em at school, you know, get 'em involved with toys or, or friends and then disappear. Don't do that. You'll make the amygdala not trust you. You will make the, that part of the brain feels unsafe and they will be hypervigilant waiting for you to leave.

They will be you. They'll, you'll not let you will encourage. them not to let you out of their sight. So be very wary of doing that. You need to give them the narrative and the confidence that they can do this. And that's kind of why I'm talking about we get through a bear hunt. We have to just go through it.

When, when there are things like

Dropping off to stay over, going to school, things like that. We need to be talking to that part of them that is going to be brave, that is going to do it and think about you.

I'm trying to think. I'm trying to give you an example. I think Karen uses an example of taking the ice cream off the table. So there's ice cream on the table and there's veggies on the table. We have to take the ice cream off the table. We can't give him an alternative than getting through it.

We've got to get through that bear hunt. So if we for instance one of the moms I was talking to yesterday said that her child was, you know, homesick because they

had an upset tummy. We know why. We know why they had an upset tummy. Because, you know, they're worried, that anxiety, the super fuel, all that.

Now, if they stay home with the iPad, they stay home. And do that kind of thing, that's almost like putting ice cream on the table, isn't it? Yeah. What is the alternative? Oh, well, if, if this happens, if I don't feel safe and this happens, it's not them being manipulative. It is them, their brain trying to feel safe.

If you give them the iPad, you are confirming that being home with you, having the iPad is the safer option. So it will just get worse tomorrow. That is what we call an accommodation. That is what we call accommodation. As our brains will constantly look at others, they will constantly look to see if they're safe.

Do think about, is this an opportunity for them to be brave?

You will be okay. They can handle this. Validate that for them. They are okay. You will do this. You've done this before. I know I believe in you. Talk to them about, you know, prep them for the day. We said on a, on a Friday, one of the teachers could tell us three things they're going to do next week that are, that's fun and exciting, you know, prepping them.

If you're going to a new party, a change, you know, where you might be dropping them off, find out a bit more detail. What are they going to do there? Who's going to be there? What's the food like? Prep them, because you're calming down that part of the brain that's going to go into fight and flight. The more preparation we can give them, the better.

Now, I'm not saying give them an essay. But go, you know, three, just three facts, three simple facts will really help. Now, one thing before we finish is get them ready to handle that, right? Because stress, fight and flight can be triggered very, very easily if they've not had enough sleep, if they've not had enough food, if they've been rushed out in the morning.

Get up, get them up and organized a little bit earlier, you know, get stuff ready the night before and have some time that connection time, whether it's around the breakfast table, kind of just have a little story, chit chat if they're a little bit older before and also talk about what to expect.

You can do the physical stuff like pebble, you know, teddy, little heart on the hand, that kind of thing. You can help them if they do start to get work up. Yes, I mentioned yoga poses earlier. You can also rub the if you're watching a video, you'll see this. I'll try and describe it on the podcast.

Between the kind of L shape between your thumb and first finger, there's that little bit of skin there. Rubbing that really helps calm down the nervous system. So that's another one that you can do. Tapping on your sternum. For kids, I call that the gorilla tap. Can you hear me doing that? Yeah, makes your kids love it because it makes the voice go off funny.

Tapping on their helps calm down the nervous system because that's a really good way of doing it as well. But build. Building the connection between you rather than separation is the biggest way that you are going to calm this down.

Thinking about how we talk about what's happening is really going to help them.

Is this scary, dangerous situation or is This brave situation. I need to be brave when they're already in stress. They don't always have the resources to be able to manage that. So the more prep you can put in them, the better. The lingering, when you're leaving, the disappearing,

the narrative, makes a massive difference. So prep them, give them a safe person, you know, and build that relationship. Big up that relationship with that safe person and give them that opportunity to grow. It's okay. I know it's hard. You're brave. We can do this together. Yeah? You take the lead on this. You know, this is a big thing.

I know you can.

Build up slowly. So if it's really bad for you, do five minutes at a time. Even bedtime, you know, sometimes bedtime is a big thing for kids. They don't, they want you to sleep with them. Now, if you're okay with that, go for it. If it is that actually you'd want a little bit of space left in your bed or, or you, you know, you don't want to be sleeping in a single with them, then build it up five minutes at a time.

Come back, keep coming back. Yeah. Think about how. You can build up that separation slowly. Better to do it slowly and at last. So if it's school, you can do

things like have that other person talk about the narrative in a very positive light and tell them what else to look forward to. So remember, I'm going to pick you up after school and this is what we're going to do.

And I guess as we finish the biggest thing for me is, and this podcast is a bit longer because I think actually it is really hard, is we can't go around it, we can't afford making those accommodations so that we don't feel bad, so they don't feel bad. So they're not upset is not going to work. You are just feeding into their anxiety, building the story.

Telling them they can do it, building up the confidence, the feeling of safety slowly and getting through it is the only way that this will disappear. It is the only way that this will disappear.

Making sense of why they feel like this for them. You know, whether that is drawing the character anxiety, whether it's talking to them, whether it's talking through the steps, telling them how brave they can be, getting them to say. You know, make that decision if they're old enough, is this dangerous or is this a brave thing I need to do?

It's the only thing that is going to give that feedback loop to the fight and flight centre to say, I am now safe without my safe person. Because guess what? I've got evidence that I am safe here, at Grandma's, with Daddy, with school. So I'm sorry if you were opening this thing hoping that I would give you a magic, you can avoid this, don't worry about it.

I'm sorry. No, that wasn't what I gave you, but what I am going to say to you, like I would say to the little people, you can do this. This is an opportunity for you to be brave. And it's an opportunity for you to tangibly teach them something. And actually, I think we look at milestones, don't we? Like. Tying shoelaces, brushing their own teeth, riding a bike as big milestones.

This, for somebody who really struggles with separation anxiety, is a massive milestone. And guess what? You're the person to do it for them. So, good luck. My I will put the links for Gracie's book, if that helps. And also Virginia Hill's The Nutritionist as well, because I just think it's So, so underrated.

And she's when we look at our nutrition and it, it does really help. So I'll put her links there as well. Big love to her and the kids and Ed. And what I would say to

you is if you have any questions, drop me a line, ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk. Sign up for the newsletter. I will put some details in this week's newsletter, all about

the podcast today and some quick tips won't be as detailed as this. But isn't it funny, we're talking about separation anxiety with our kids and how that can affect wanting to run from scary things, but actually as adults. Should we not be asking ourselves in lots of situations? Is this, is this a dangerous situation or is this an opportunity for me to grow?

And what I'd say to you is, guys, this right here is an opportunity for you to grow and for them. So good luck. Take care. Lots of love on Valentine's Day. From my family to yours, bye for now.