

Practical Matters

Leaving without tears: Parents inadvertently train their children to protest separation

by
Jacob L. Gewirtz
Florida International University
and
Martha Peláez-Nogueras
University of Miami School of Medicine

[The following article was written at the suggestion of Professor Lewis Lipsitt, a member of this SIG. It was published under Lipsitt's editorship in a recent issue of The Brown University Child and Adolescent Letter.]

Few parents know how to cope with the crying and tantrums children use when mom and dad are getting ready to go out. With separation protests, children can delay their parents' departures and thus control the adults' agendas. Research shows that, at separation, parental responses to children's protests encourage - and thereby reinforce - the behavior. But there is a way parents can be responsive to their children's needs and avoid inadvertently training their children in negative behaviors.

Parents receive precious little help from books and popular advice that typically take little or no account of how caregiver reactions can shape problem behaviors in children. In the child-development literature, age-associated behavior traits are mentioned most often with the advice that the child will "grow out of it." Problem behaviors at separation are said to result from such natural underlying causes as "attachment security" or "separation anxiety," but no solutions for the problems are offered.

Paradoxically, some parents feel flattered or more loved when their freedom to leave is limited or controlled by their child's protests. These parents believe that the protests are natural and result from the strong loving "attachment" the child has for them. Indeed, some researchers have treated the young child's separation protests during the first 18 months as an index of attachment. Also, some parents assume that the protests during parental departures result from separation anxiety.

The fact is that parental responses can encourage and otherwise shape child behaviors. Parents often respond inappropriately to their children's behaviors. They provide "misplaced contingencies" under such commendable intentions as providing a secure base or loving attention in re-

sponse to the needs of their children.

Goodbye cues

Child protests of separations are routinely cued by a parent's preparations to leave the child. The behavioral cues that signal parental departure can involve a mother picking up her car keys and purse, placing her baby in the crib or playpen while saying goodbye, or the arrival of a babysitter.

Departure-cued protests include fusses, whines, whimpers, cries and screams. In children with more advanced verbal and motor skills, protests may also involve grabbing the parent's body or clothes, pleading or throwing a temper tantrum. These behaviors are obviously meant to delay a parent's departure and to cut short a separation from the parent. In turn, parental responses to the child's protests can include delaying a departure, returning to or reasoning with the child, or vacillating during the departure. The parent's behavior can also include returning after separation, in response to the child's protest, to touch, pick up or hug and kiss the child. These parent behaviors all provide attention contingent on the child's protests. The child trains the parent to behave this way, by stopping protests contingent on the parent's delaying departures or cutting short separations. Thus, parent-behavior problems can result from child behaviors.

Situations involving infant-separation protests can occur in the baby's bedroom, particularly at bedtime. They can also occur when the infant is left for the first few occasions with a babysitter or other caregiver. Outside the home, infants and toddlers may protest when they see their parents (or other primary caregivers) leaving them for the first time in an unknown place, such as a preschool. Needless to say, situations involving child protests - and the crying episodes that may accompany them - can distort the relationships involved, disorganize home and school settings and distress parents, caregivers and teachers. If not dealt with appropriately in a timely manner, child protests, which may originally appear to be mild, may become far more intense responses.

Red herrings

Our research indicates that, while a child's protests can serve to index an attachment to the parent, or separation anxiety, those protests are neither caused by nor result from either. Parental attending reactions to infant protests during departures and after separations actually can make recurrences of protests more likely in future situations.

The parental attention-giving reactions to infant protests can produce two effects: First, they can bring infant protests under the control of departure and separation cures by the parent; second, those parent behaviors can shape and maintain diverse infant-protest patterns. Our research has led us to conclude that infant-separation difficulties can result simply from misplaced contingencies provided by the parent (or other caregiver) in response to undesirable child behaviors.

For example, if children are answered by parents' contingent returns, the children will learn that their protests bring results. On the other hand, if the parent's return to the child's room are made non-contingently, that is, only at times when the child has not just protested, the child would readily develop more constructive behaviors and cope much better with such situations. Our studies show that the child can readily learn to tolerate, without protest, increasingly longer separations from the parent.

To minimize or eliminate infant-separation protests, parents should routinely make unrequested visits to the child's room or vicinity, when the child has not recently protested, and remain there for varying periods. On each of these occasions, the parent should separate from the child in a straight forward manner, regardless of protests. The child thus learns that the parent is often available without the child's protest being required to keep the parent nearby or to return the parent to the vicinity (see box).

A sensitive parent should know how to respond to the context of each separation protest. For example, parents can usually tell when their child is crying out of pain, hunger or just demand for attention. Our research provides evidence that the pattern of parental responding to the infant's cued protests -- which may appeal to the concept of "positive/loving mothering" -- can generate problems of infant-management behavior. These problems can preclude the constructive fostering of developmentally appropriate and more advanced infant social and cognitive behaviors. Appreciating the parental role in separation problems and in procedures to end them provides a basis for understanding early social development and parent-child interaction.

Parents can make parting less painful for their children, while avoiding the reinforcement of unconstructive behavior, by following these guidelines:

**Before departure, the parent should ensure that the child is in good shape (comfortable, well fed, not ill) and safe, alone or with a trusted caregiver.*

**If the child is doing well (for instance, playing), the parent announces a departure to the child (for instance, by kissing the child and saying: "I'll be back in a while.") For older children, at her or his option, the parent might also explain the departure and indicate when she or he plans to return. However, such an explanation is not critical. Then, the parent leaves the setting directly.*

**The parent departs firmly without vacillating or responding to any protest.*

**A parent who has left the setting must not return to pick up the protesting child.*

IXth Biennial International Conference on Infant Studies

The biennial conference of ISIS (International Society for Infant Studies) will be held in Paris, France, from June 1-5, 1994, in the Maison de la Chimie (28 rue St. Dominique), which is a lovely XVIIIth. century historic house situated in one of the most exciting districts of the city. For information and accommodations contact Conference Chair: Dr. H. Bloch, LPBD 41 rue Gay Lussac 75005, Paris, France.

The infant conditioning/learning panel for the ISIS conference is being chaired by Jack Gewirtz, and includes Lewis Lipsitt, Fergus Lowe, Claire Poulson, and Viviane Pouthas.