



# Shepherding Young Children

(2 and 3 year olds: What to do when a child cries.)

## Understand why children cry

### **1. Separation anxiety:**

Children this age often cry when separated from their parents. It's a natural part of a child's growth and development to feel secure when their parent is with them and less secure when the parent leaves. Children adapt according to different personalities and ages as they become more secure with a parent leaving them. A normal part of growth is children overcoming their separation anxiety by learning that it is okay for a parent to leave them because the parent *does* return.

### **2. Unfamiliar setting:**

A child will often cry when put in an unfamiliar setting. Some children according to personality adjust quicker to new environments than others. The environment for all children will make a difference on how quickly they feel secure.

### **3. Anxiety because others are crying:**

Children are learning how they are to respond when they encounter a new setting or learning how to let their parents leave them. One child crying in such a setting will often cause another child to cry in response to the anxiety in the room.

## How to advise parents about leaving their child

### **1. Don't surprise the child with a new setting.**

Instruct and encourage the parents to help their child become familiar with a new setting. It is helpful before the new situation begins to tell the child what to expect from the new activity or place. If possible, have the child visit the new setting for just a few minutes before actually attending.

If you are with the parents and child while they are visiting, tell the child that when he/she returns, there will be other children to play with and that this will become their room.

### **2. Don't downplay a child's unhappiness.**

When a child is brought for the first time and is unhappy, acknowledge the child's sadness. Parents may want to say something like, "I know you are sad (or upset) right now. Look around at all the fun things there are to do. Let's try to find something you would like to do. I'll watch you for a minute or two before I go."

It will be your responsibility as a shepherd to be affirming to both the parent and the child as they separate. Have toys, books or other items ready to share with the child, as children of this age are easily distracted.

### **3. Don't stay for more than just a few minutes.**

Parents need to know that it will not help their child adjust by staying longer. It is easy for parents to feel frustrated, bewildered or embarrassed when their child continues to cry for long periods. A parent's first instinct is to stay with their child and comfort him/her. However, young children can pick up on their parent's emotions of bewilderment and this may make it more difficult for a young child to stop crying. Though the parent needs to be empathetic, the parent needs to keep as calm as possible, and leave after a quick moment of reassurance.

### **4. Communicate with the adult(s) in charge.**

As a child is turned over to your charge, encourage the parent to hug the child and then leave. Find out where the parent will be and how long the child may remain upset before the parent is to be called. Each case is individual. By communicating well with parents, you relieve anxiety and, indirectly, the anxiety of the child.

If a child is still crying after seven to ten minutes, and will not seem to stop, this would be an appropriate time to call the parent.

### **5. Understanding the effect of parents in the room.**

Parents are frequently asked to help in their child's classroom. They can support the staff by helping with various projects. However, most children are better adjusted in a classroom without their parents than when their parents are there. Many happy, well-adjusted children will become clingy or weepy when their parents are in the room with them.

If a child is experiencing lots of difficulty, recommend to the parent that they leave with the promise that you will call them, if needed, and will give them a full report about how the child did in their absence.