

CLINGING THREE YEAR OLD

I have a 3-yr. old daughter, who was a severely colicky baby for the
>first
>> > year of her life. She has always been a "mama's baby", which I don't
>> really
>> > mind. The problem is, now that she is getting a little older, she is
>> > attached to me, now more than ever. If you're wondering, I have never
>> left
>> > her, with anyone, for long periods of time, but she acts as if I am
>never
>> > coming back, when I need to run to the store, and try to leave her with
>> > daddy, for one example. For another, she will not let me take a shower
>by
>> > myself, and if I lock her out of the bathroom, she just screams and
>yells,
>> > until I come out. She gets upset, if I don't "drop everything", and go
>to
>> > her right away, gets jealous when I show daddy any affection, at all,
>and
>> I
>> > just don't know what to do. I need to know if this is normal, or not,
>and
>> > if not, what else should I do? Don't get me wrong, I am not saying I
>just
>> > don't want her to be attached to me, or whatever, but when I can't even
>go
>> > to the bathroom alone, I'm wondering if there may be more to it, than
>just
>> > "clinginess"? If you have any advice, I would greatly appreciate it.
>> >
>> > Thanks for your time, ANNA
>> >

Dear Anna,

You are facing a matter that deserves some special attention. But let me add right here – the attention is warranted in order to turn a developmental corner. What you describe is probably NOT already a fixed problem, but it might become fixed if it continues to both mystify and control you.

Your daughter is running scared. Her fear is probably more about spoiling her relationship with you that about your actually abandoning her. You see, "separation anxiety" grows up along with the child. At first it is about feeling like falling apart when mother leaves. Then it is about a physical abandonment, "mommy won't ever come back". Next – at 3 – it is about anger. "When I get angry at Mommy for leaving she must also be angry at me, and so she leaves out of anger, and so she will always stay angry and so smiling friendly mother will get spoiled forever". Later it will be about being injured, and then about feeling guilty. But let's stay with what has happened so far.

Colic could well be part of the background for your daughter's difficulty. Very little children always assume that if something hurts them, their parents are in some way responsible at the least for not preventing the pain. Children are sure parents can do everything, which has its plusses and minuses. This is one of the minuses. She was too young to talk about any of this then.

But she is not too young to talk now. So your challenge is to help your daughter to "bring up" her fears until they are within her own control. The matter is between her and herself, NOT an issue for your control. Your role is to help her get into the developmental driver's seat SHE needs.

This will involve telling her that you understand that she is so very frightened when you leave her. She acts in just the right way for being so frightened. But doesn't she suffer from being so frightened? Wouldn't she like to feel bigger and more like Mommy – and be able to take care of her fears rather than be swamped by them?

Now we have two avenues of approach, and you will need both. The first involves understanding her fear. What is she so frightened will happen when you leave her? That you won't come back? Or that you will be angry when you come back and will stay angry? Or that you will get hurt (she might project her anger at you as something that the world will do to you)? You can recognize how deep such fears feel.

Then you can ask her how you and she can make a plan to make her the boss over these fears. This is the second avenue. Can you make a sort of ritual with her about leaving and then about coming back? Within this you can talk about her fears and then practice showing that things are ok in the end. She may need some special toy or doll, or even a tape, or videotape of you reassuring her. You can make this with her. And she needs to hear that you respect greatly all her efforts at this very big job. Growing up is hard work and deserves admiration rather than expectations – in this case.

You may also find that if you PLAY with this problem, the corner will be easier to turn. For example, you could buy her a special doll, say a monkey, and have her teach the “silly” monkey how to get over its fears when she leaves it. You can recreate the whole deal, putting what you think are her fears in the monkey’s mouth, and having her do your role. You may also find that reading **CURIOUS GEORGE FLIES A KITE** by Margret and H.A. Rey could help out. It is a wonderful book with attachment and separation as the dominant theme. Then the monkey you could buy could be George himself.

See what you are facing as a problem that deserves a problem-solving approach. Don’t force any one solution, but let your daughter know that you are planning to help her to make progress here, and that she will feel much better with herself this way.

If you seem to still get stuck, there may be a temperamental extreme here that needs some additional help. For this you would consult a child psychologist or psychiatrist specializing in pre-schoolers, or a pediatrician specializing in behavioral pediatrics.