



Big Feelings Are Like Trains:

Helping Young Children Through Anxiety, Worry, and Separation

Toddlers and preschoolers have big feelings in very small bodies, and sometimes those feelings seem to come out of nowhere.

They may look like:

- Tears at drop-off
- Clinging at goodbye
- Worries at bedtime
- Fear when routines change
- Meltdowns over small disappointments
- Sudden panic about things that never seemed to bother them before

This is a normal part of early childhood. Young children are still learning how emotions work and how to move through them. They need adults to help guide them—not erase the feelings, and not get swept up in them.

One of the best descriptions of this comes from an article we love:

“The Train Analogy That Will Change How You See Your Crying Child”

<https://www.pickanytwo.net/the-train-analogy-that-will-change-how-you-see-your-crying-child/>

The idea is simple and powerful: emotions are like trains. Once a child is on the train, they need to ride it all the way through.

The Feeling Train

When a child is upset, they are already on the train.

Their sadness, fear, frustration, or anxiety has left the station, and the only real way out is through. They need to ride the whole train until it reaches the other side.

Our job is not to stop the train.

Our job is not to drag them off halfway.

And our job is definitely not to jump aboard and start riding it with them.

The Mistake Adults Often Make

When children are distressed, adults often accidentally climb onto the feeling train too.

That can look like:

- Too much talking
- Too much explaining
- Repeating reassurances over and over
- Asking too many questions
- Trying to reason feelings away
- Becoming emotionally swept up ourselves

Example: Child: *“Don’t leave! I miss you! I can’t do it!”*

Adult (on the train): *“But remember, I told you I’ll be back after nap, and your teacher loves you, and yesterday you had fun, and—”*

It comes from a loving place, but it often keeps the train going longer.

Why? Because when children are overwhelmed, they are not available for logic.

What Actually Helps

Instead: stay on the platform.

Be calm.

Be steady.

Be brief.

Think of yourself as the anchor, not the passenger.

Try short, simple phrases:

- “You’re safe. I’ll be back after rest time.”
- “I know this feels hard. Your teacher will help you.”
- “I hear you. It’s okay to feel sad.”
- “I love you. See you after school.”

Then stop talking. Let the feeling move through.

Separation Anxiety: Less Is More

Separation anxiety is especially common in toddlers and preschoolers, even when children love school and settle quickly after drop-off.

At drop-off, loving confidence matters more than long reassurance.

A long emotional goodbye often says:

This is something to worry about.

A calm short goodbye says:
This is hard, and you can handle it.

What helps most:

1. Keep goodbye routines short and predictable
2. Use the same calm phrase each day
3. Leave confidently once you say goodbye

No sneaking away.
No returning for "one more hug" five times.

Long, drawn-out departures almost always make separation harder.

Crying Is Not an Emergency

A crying child does not always need the feeling stopped.

Crying is often simply emotion moving through the system. Sometimes children need:

- Your calm presence
- A hand on their back
- Quiet reassurance
- Space to finish the feeling

Not fixing.
Not rescuing.
Not stopping the tears too soon.

Let the train move.

A Helpful Reminder for Parents

When your child is anxious, upset, or overwhelmed:

You do not need to fix the feeling.
You only need to help them feel safe while they have it.

That calm presence is what helps children build resilience over time.

Big feelings pass.
The more children experience that safely, the more confidence they gain in handling them.