09.11 Managing separation anxiety in children

Separation anxiety occurs when children do not feel securely attached to their key person. Taking steps to reduce anxiety and promote attachment is a priority task for the key person in partnership with the parents/carers.

- Separation anxiety can be identified when signals are clearly understood by members of staff.
- Distress in children produces high levels of corticosteroids (neurochemicals) which hinder brain functioning. It is detrimental for children to experience prolonged distress. Signals include:
  - crying inconsolably for extended periods; causing coughing or difficulty to breath or vomiting
  - holding breath
  - head banging or rocking
  - ambivalent feelings towards the key person, i.e. wanting to be picked up then struggling free
  - frantic movement or lashing out with arms and legs
  - biting, tantrums and snatching from others.
  - jealousy shown towards other children in the key group
  - refusing food or drink or showing signs of digestive problems
  - temporary interest in toys or others, then crying again.
  - prolonged periods of sleep
  - switching off, staring blankly
  - anxiousness about who is coming in and out of a room, standing by the door for long periods
  - being held, but not responding or smiling
  - crying when the parent collects or cheering up and eager when parent collects
- A picture of evidence builds up which may suggest that the baby/toddler is experiencing separation anxiety. This needs to be discussed with the parent/carer and a plan made to help the child settle.
- The parent and key person discuss the reasons that the separation anxiety has developed or been made worse. It could be due to:
  - hurried settling-in due to pressures on parents/carers
  - inadequate settling in due to the key person being absent or the baby not being brought in each day to complete the settling-in plan

- the key person's absence during settling in period
- changes of staff
- part time attendance not allowing sufficient continuity for the baby to become familiar with the surroundings and to make an attachment to the key person
- change of key person in the setting
- changes at home – stress events in the family
- baby's illness
- family having been away on holiday
- previous distressing experiences with another setting

- The goal of any plan is to ensure the child is secure through forming an attachment with the key person.
- The settling in process is reviewed; if any aspect has been missed, this needs to be re-planned. This may include the need for the parent/carer to stay or find a close relative or friend whom the child feels safe with if the parent/carer cannot be there.
- A child who will be attending on a part-time basis will need to come in daily until he/she is familiar and beginning to settle.