



THE HAPPY GOOD-BYE

When his son experienced a bout of separation anxiety, **Chris Thomas** dreamed up simple and smart school-day strategies.

“MY TUMMY HURTS.”

Anthony’s voice came from the back of the car as I pulled up in front of the school. In the rearview mirror, I could see my second grader staring back at me with eyes that said, “I’m not ready to face the world inside those hallways today, Dad.”

This wasn’t an unfamiliar occurrence; in fact, it was becoming a regular event. What was curious, though,

was that my 7-year-old son’s change in attitude seemed to happen overnight. A kid who’d been chipper and bright-eyed and ready to learn had suddenly taken to curling up on the couch every morning, on the verge of tears, telling us how much he hated school, and how he really didn’t want to go.

My wife, Kristin, and I struggled to figure out what was going on. First things first: we immediately needed

to rule out that he was actually sick. A quick trip to our family doctor confirmed what we already figured—he was physically fine, and what he was experiencing was probably a case of nerves. Next, a chat with his teacher and the social worker at school was in order. Perhaps he was trying to avoid a particular subject that was difficult for him—or maybe he was being bullied?

After the conferences, though, it was clear that neither scenario was the cause of his school-day struggles. Kristin and I decided it was time for a sit down—a one-on-one, “let’s get to the bottom of this” conversation with him. So we asked Anthony, “What can we do to make you enjoy school again (or at the very least go in without a fight)?” Finally, after some coaxing, he revealed that he just didn’t want to be far from his family. Clearly, Anthony was suffering from a nasty bout of separation anxiety.

OUR FIRST RESPONSE:

devising morning strategies to ease the way. Searching for solutions, Kristin and I talked it through and hit upon a step-by-step plan that the three of us could follow.

First, I had Anthony make me a bracelet on his Rainbow Loom. He wove one in red, black, and white, the colors of our beloved Chicago Blackhawks. I put it on and told him I’d wear it to work every day, and each time I saw it, I’d think of him. In return I gave him an old coin of mine that he’d been admiring

to carry in his pocket. This way, any time he was feeling nervous or anxious, he could simply reach into his pocket, grab the coin, and think of his mom and dad.

Second, when Kristin brought him to school and all went well, he would get to brag about his successful drop-off by sending me a text message that read :-).

Third, we brought out the incentives. We didn’t want to pay him to go to school, but we did want to reward him for good behavior and for trying his best. Toys and games were off the table right away. Instead, we offered him the chance to have lunch with Mom all to himself, another with Dad, and a dinner out that included his 5-year-old twin brothers Cole and Max—his pick of restaurant—once I collected enough of his bragging text messages.

Slowly, our three strategies started to work. It didn’t happen overnight, and some days I didn’t get my :-)

Anthony made progress, though, and soon stress-free good-byes became the norm. Plus, I got a kick out of wearing my bracelet—and Kristin and I got to enjoy some pretty sweet meals out with our now more confident little boy.

meet the family



The Thomas family of Brookfield, Illinois.