Fear of Abandonment

Three-year-old Allie didn't have a chance to say goodbye to a special caregiver friend when she and her family moved, and she never saw the friend again. Her parents talked about her sometimes but her friend never came to visit and Allie couldn't help wondering why. Did her friend not like her or care about her anymore? Did Allie do something wrong to make her friend never want to come to see her again? Of course, Allie was not able to explain to anyone how she felt about never seeing her friend again, but for many years, even as an adult, she felt anxious when people she cared about went away for long periods of time.

Some causes of abandonment issues:
- The loss of a parent or trusted caregiver through separation, divorce or death
- Repeated experience with promises that aren't kept (e.g., promises to return at a specific time, promises from an absent parent)
- Frequent parental absences for long periods of time (e.g., if a parent travels a lot on the job)
- Turning the caregiving for the child over to someone else without explanation and reassurance

Symptoms and effects of fears of abandonment:
- Inaccurate understanding of absent parent (either reject everything about or idealize the parent)
- Poor self-esteem, feelings of guilt and shame (e.g., belief that it’s the child’s fault the parent left)
- Inability to form secure attachments and bond with caregivers; inability to trust and feel safe
- Behavioral problems and acting out
- Feelings of confusion, anger and sadness; generalized fears and insecurities
- Regression in developmental tasks like such as potty-training

How to help:
- Investigate the child’s circumstances to determine what may have happened that is causing the child to feel abandoned. Don’t dismiss something because it seems insignificant; to a child, it does not feel insignificant.
- Provide ongoing reassurance that the child is not alone and people will take care of and love him or her
- Assure the child that he or she is not responsible for the person leaving
- Help the child express sad and angry feelings; seek professional help if feelings and behaviors worsen

Resources
- “Perspective on Fear of Abandonment”: http://sfhelp.org/gwc/abandon.htm