

## Separation Anxiety

Tearful, tantrum-filled goodbyes are common during a child's earliest years. Around the first birthday, many kids develop separation anxiety, getting upset when a parent tries to leave them with someone else.

Though separation anxiety is a perfectly normal part of childhood development, it can be unsettling.

Understanding what your child is going through and having a few coping strategies ready can help both of you get through it.

### About Separation Anxiety

Babies adapt pretty well to other caregivers. Parents probably feel more anxiety about being separated than infants do! As long as their needs are being met, most babies younger than 6 months adjust easily to other people.

Between 4-7 months of age, babies develop a sense of "object permanence." They're realizing that things and people exist even when they're out of sight. Babies learn that when they can't see mom or dad, that means they've gone away. They don't understand the concept of time, so they don't know mom will come back, and can become upset by her absence. Whether mom is in the kitchen, in the next bedroom, or at the office, it's all the same to the baby, who might cry until mom is nearby again.

Kids between 8 months and 1 year old are growing into more independent toddlers, yet are even more uncertain about being separated from a parent. This is when separation anxiety develops, and children may become agitated and upset when a parent tries to leave.

Whether you need to go into the next room for just a few seconds, leave your child with a sitter for the evening, or drop off your child at daycare, your child might now react by crying, clinging to you, and resisting attention from others.

The timing of separation anxiety can vary. Some kids might go through it later, between 18 months and 2½ years of age. Some never experience it. And for others, certain life stresses can trigger feelings of anxiety about being separated from a parent: a new childcare situation or caregiver, a new sibling, moving to a new place, or tension at home.

### How Long Does It Last?

How long separation anxiety lasts can vary, depending on the child and how a parent responds. In some cases, depending on a child's temperament, separation anxiety can last from infancy through the elementary school years.

Separation anxiety that affects an older child's normal activities can be a sign of a deeper anxiety disorder. If separation anxiety appears out of the blue in an older child, there might be another problem, like bullying or abuse.

Separation anxiety is different from the normal feelings older kids have when they don't want a parent to leave (which can usually be overcome if a child is distracted enough). And kids do understand the effect this has on parents. If you run back into the room every time your child cries or cancel your plans, your child will continue to use this tactic to avoid separation.

### What You Might Feel

Separation anxiety might have you feeling a variety of emotions. It can be nice to feel that your child is finally as attached to you as you are to him or her. But you're also likely to feel guilty about taking time out for yourself, leaving your child with a caregiver, or going to work. And you may start to feel overwhelmed by the amount of attention your child seems to need from you.

Keep in mind that your little one's unwillingness to leave you is a good sign that healthy attachments have developed between the two of you. Eventually, your child will be able to remember that you always return after you leave, and that will be comfort enough while you're gone. This also gives kids a chance to develop coping skills and a little independence.

### Making Goodbyes Easier

These tips can help ease kids and parents through this difficult period:

- **Timing is everything.** Try not to start daycare or childcare with an unfamiliar person when your child is between the ages of 8 months and 1 year, when separation anxiety is first likely to appear. Also, try not to leave when your child is tired, hungry, or restless. If at all possible, schedule your departures for after naps and mealtimes.
- **Practice.** Practice being apart from each other, and introduce new people and places slowly. If you plan to leave your child with a relative or a new babysitter, invite that person over in advance so they can spend time together while you're in the room. If your child is starting at a new daycare center or preschool, make a few visits there together before a full-time schedule begins. Practice leaving your child with a caregiver for short periods so that he or she can get used to being away from you.
- **Be calm and consistent.** Create an exit ritual during which you say a pleasant, loving, and firm goodbye. Stay calm and show confidence in your child. Reassure him or her that you'll be back — and explain when you'll return using concepts kids will understand (such as after lunch). Give your full attention when you say goodbye, and when you say you're leaving, mean it; coming back will only make things worse.
- **Follow through on promises.** It's important to make sure that you return when you have promised to. This is critical — this is how your child will develop the confidence that he or she can make it through the time apart.

As hard as it may be to leave a child who's screaming and crying for you, it's important to have confidence that the caregiver can handle it. By the time you get to your car, your child is likely to have calmed down and be playing with other things.

If you're caring for another person's child who's having separation anxiety, try to distract the child with an activity or toy, or with songs, games, or anything else that's fun. You may have to keep trying until something just clicks with the child.

Also, try not to mention the child's mother or father, but do answer the child's questions in a simple and straightforward way. You might say: "Mommy and Daddy are going to be back as soon as they are done dinner. Let's play with some toys!"

### **It's Only Temporary**

Remember, this phase will pass. If your child has never been cared for by anyone but you, is naturally shy, or has other stresses, separation anxiety may be worse than it is for other kids.

Also, trust your instincts. If your child refuses to go to a certain babysitter or daycare center or shows other signs of tensions, such as trouble sleeping or loss of appetite, there could be a problem with the childcare situation.

If intense separation anxiety lasts into preschool, elementary school, or beyond and interferes with daily activities, discuss it with your doctor. It could be a sign of a rare but more serious condition known as separation anxiety disorder. Kids with this disorder fear being lost from their family members and are often convinced that something bad will happen. Talk with your doctor if your child has signs of this, including:

- panic symptoms (such as nausea, vomiting, or shortness of breath) or panic attacks before a parent leaves
- nightmares about separation
- fear of sleeping alone (although this is also common in kids who don't have separation anxiety)
- excessive worry about being lost or kidnapped or going places without a parent

For most kids, the anxiety of being apart from a parent passes without any need for medical attention. But if you have concerns, talk to your doctor.

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