

# 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 can help both of you get through it.

## How Separation Anxiety Develops

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.

Sometime between 4-7 months, babies develop a sense of object permanence and begin to learn that things and people exist even when they're out of sight. This is when babies start playing the "dropsy" game — dropping things over the side of the high chair and expecting an adult to pick them up (which, once retrieved, get dropped again!).

The same thing occurs with a parent. Babies realize that there's only mom or dad, and when they can't see you, that means you've gone away. And most don't yet understand the concept of time so they do not know if or when you'll come back.

Whether you're in the kitchen, in the next bedroom, or at the office, it's all the same to your baby. You've disappeared, and your child will do whatever he or she can to prevent this from happening.

## Stresses Can Trigger Anxiety

When they're between 8 months and 1 year old, kids grow 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 little might now react by crying, clinging to you, and resisting attention from others.

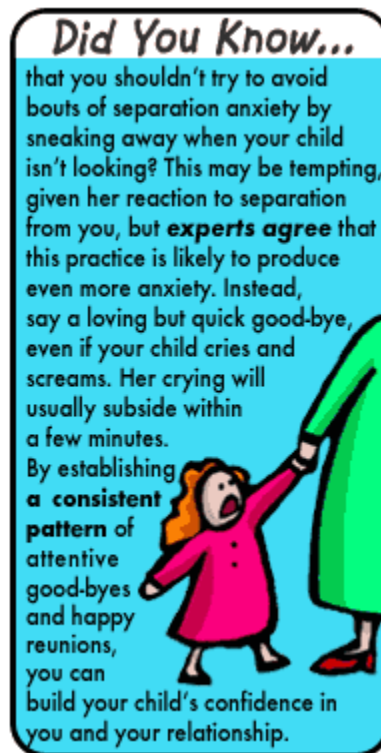
The timing of separation anxiety can vary widely from child to child. Some kids might go through it later, between 18 months and 2½ years of age. Some never experience it. And for others, certain life stresses can trigger feelings of anxiety about being separated from a parent: a new childcare situation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

How long does separation anxiety last? It varies, 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. In cases where the separation anxiety interferes with an older child's normal activities, it can indicate 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. In those cases, the distress can usually be overcome if a child is distracted enough and won't re-emerge until the parent returns and the child remembers that the parent left.

And kids do understand the effect this behavior has on parents. If you come running back into the room every time your child cries and then stay there longer or cancel your plans, your child will continue to use this tactic to avoid separation.

## What You May Be Feeling



During this stage, you might experience different emotions. It can be gratifying to feel that your child is finally as attached to you as you are to him or her. But you're 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 enough comfort while you're gone. This also gives kids a chance to develop coping skills and a little independence.

## Making Goodbyes Easier

These strategies 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 little one 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 likely to be 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 gradually. If your child is starting at a new daycare center or preschool, make a few visits there together before a full-time schedule begins.
- **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 how long it will be until you return using concepts kids will understand (such as after lunch) because your child can't yet understand time. Give him or her 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. It may help both of you to set up a time that you will call to check in, maybe 15 to 20 minutes after you leave. By that time, most kids have calmed down and are playing with other things. Don't let yourself give in early and call sooner!

If you're caring for another person's child who's experiencing 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 about his or her parents 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 that this phase will pass. If your child has never been cared for by anyone but you, is naturally shy, or has other stresses, it may be worse than it is for other kids.

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, then there could be a problem with the childcare situation.

If intense separation anxiety lasts into preschool, elementary school, or beyond and interferes with your 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 separation anxiety 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 separated from a parent passes without any need for medical attention. But if you have concerns, talk to your doctor.