

Separation Anxiety in Young Children

by Carol E. Watkins, MD © January 2001

Normal anxiety and fear tends to follow a developmental sequence. These tendencies seem to be hard-wired and seem to have a developmental purpose. Reluctance to be separated from one's caregiver is a normal, healthy response in young children and indicates their development of healthy attachment.

Normal Development of Separation: Most common times for separation fears: eight months, twelve months and anywhere between 18 months to three years. The child's crying and clinging can express two different messages.

Message 1: the child may cry when the parent leaves because they fear that the parent will be gone forever.

Message 2: the child, often after a fairly good day, begins to cry when the parent returns. This is because the parent's return reminds the child of how he or she felt when the parent left.

The degree of separation difficulty may vary from day to day. One day, the child may be anxious to go and another day, clingy and sad. Separation anxiety generally decreases between 2 and 3 years of age.

Adults, too, experience anxiety when separated from loved ones, but it is usually not so overwhelming. The adult has a better concept of time and has had more experience dealing successfully with separation.

Factors that may contribute to separation anxiety

- Tiredness
- Minor or major illness
- Changes in the household routine
- Family changes such as birth of a sibling, divorce, death or illness.
- Change in caregiver or routine at day care center.
- Parents usually are not the cause of the separation anxiety, but they can make things worse.

Factors that may reduce the chances of developing separation anxiety

- Helps the child tolerate short periods away from the parent, encourages him or her to build trust in other adults.
- By age 2 ½, the child should be experiencing play groups. This is especially important for children who seem overly dependent on their parents.

Supporting a child through periods of separation anxiety.

- Positive experiences with caregivers.
- Rituals (bedtime and morning preparation for separation/going to childcare)
- Do not give in. Let the child know that he or she will be all right.
- Remind the child of previous brave things he or she has done. Talk about how a fictional character might handle it.
- Do not bribe child to mask the distress. If you plan a special activity after you pick the child up, let it be unconditional.
- Focus on the positive things that happened in daycare. Don't let them dwell on fears or imagination of what might happen.
- Minimize fears by limiting scary TV shows
- Preparing the child--reading books about going to preschool, pretending about going on voyages or quests.
- Expect a child to be more tired and possibly more irritable than usual when he or she starts Kindergarten or First grade for the first few weeks.
- When leaving, give a quick kiss and hug and cheerfully say goodbye.
- Don't prolong your departure or come back several times.
- Don't sneak out of the room.
- If your child does stay home, do not make it an extra fun, gratifying day.

Separation Anxiety & Your Toddler

by Leah Mosca, Dip. Children's Services, Sep 2005

Why do toddlers get upset whenever you leave them?

Your toddler's biggest fear is of losing you. That's why they cling round your leg.

Fear of separation starts early most babies form their closest bond with their parents, particularly their mother as she looks after them the most. Their attachment is greatest between 12-18 months and then toddlers become increasingly independent and self-assertive.

Reluctance to be separated from one's primary caregiver is a normal, healthy response in young children and indicated the development of healthy attachment. But even though it's perfectly normal, it can be extremely unsettling for parents.

Some children may experience it later, around 3 or 4 years of age. Some may never experience it. And for others, there are certain life stresses that can set off feelings of separation anxiety: a new child care situation or caregiver, a new sibling, moving to a new place, or tension at home.

Separation anxiety is a little one's way of saying how much they *really* don't want to say good-bye. Most often, however, separation anxiety is purely a "missing mum/dad" issue.

Separation Anxiety: Ways to Ease Your Child's Fears

DO: Keep your good-byes short and sweet. In doing so, you convey the message that you have confidence in your child's ability to cope. Instead of saying goodbyes to your child, say 'see you soon' or 'I'll be back in a little while'. This reassures the child that you are going to come back and not leave them forever.

DON'T: Prolong your departure or come back several times. Your child will sense your anxiety, and this will make it more difficult for him/her to calm down. Give your child your full attention when you say good-bye, and when you say you're leaving, mean it; coming back will only make things worse.

DO: Remind the child of previous brave things he or she has done. Talk about how a fictional character might handle it.

DON'T: Sneak out. You want your child to know unequivocally that she can trust you.

DO: Develop loving good-bye routines. (example: a quick Cuddle followed by a kiss on the cheek or forehead)

DON'T: Bargain or bribe your child to behave. Your little one should be allowed his/her feelings.

DO: Send clear messages. Your child needs to know that you expect him to go to school no matter how much he/she fusses, cries or stamps his/her feet.

DON'T: Take your child home from care if they are fussing. If you do, you send the message that if your child cries enough he won't have to stay.

DO: Ask your spouse or another family member to take a turn dropping your child off.

DON'T: Discuss problems with your Carer in the morning. Save conversations and questions for the end of the day. Or ring them and discuss over the phone.

DO: Prepare the child by reading books about going to Care. Ask the Carer for a photo of themselves and the children in care and use them when talking about going to care. Remind them of the fun they will have the next time they go. (find out what is planned for that day)

DON'T: Be surprised if you solve the problem and it reoccurs after holidays and sick days.

DO: Give your child a comfort item it may be: a family picture, a soft toy, mum's necklace, dad's wallet (no money of course). This is a loving reminder for your child. Items belonging to parents have a way of reassuring your return especially if you ask them to look after the item while you are away.

DO: Believe in your child's ability to make positive changes.

Remember: Separation anxiety means that a strong and loving bond exists between you and your child.

Anxiety doesn't have to be a problem for you or your child. Don't rush your child too much, but don't let him or her control you either. Be loving and firm, and eventually his or hers separation anxiety will disappear.