

Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is the fear children have of being parted from their parents or guardians. It's common and normal among babies and toddlers. A very small number of preschoolers and school-age children develop a more serious form of the condition, called separation anxiety disorder. There are things you can do if you have a child with either of these issues.

Identifying separation anxiety

Separation anxiety reaches its peak in babies aged 14-18 months and typically decreases throughout early childhood. Stranger anxiety is similar to separation anxiety and involves wariness and distress in the presence of unfamiliar people. It can occur from 8-10 months and usually decreases after the child's first birthday.

These anxieties are a normal part of development, and are nothing to be concerned about. After all, these anxieties occur when children are becoming more mobile, so they make sense from a survival point of view – that is, if children could crawl or walk away from their carers but weren't afraid of separation or strangers, they would get lost more easily.



Separation anxiety disorder

As children reach preschool and school age, they are less likely to experience separation anxiety. Of course, there will always be times when they only want to be with you.

If children in this age group seem particularly and regularly distressed about being separated from their parents, it's possible they might have separation anxiety disorder. According to a 2009 study, 4% of preschoolers and school-age children develop this condition.

Separation anxiety disorder is defined as occurring when the:

- anxiety interferes with the child's life, and subsequently the parent's life
- severity of the anxiety is inappropriate for the child's developmental level
- characteristics of separation anxiety have persisted for at least four weeks.

If you're concerned your child might have separation anxiety disorder, look out for instances when she:

- dislikes being separated from you
- worries that you or she might get hurt or have an accident
- refuses to go to day care, preschool or school
- refuses to sleep at other people's places without you

- complains about feeling sick when separated.



Research tells us that 90% of 10-month-old infants will become upset if a stranger approaches them in an unfamiliar room. Only 50% will become upset if the child is given time (10 minutes) to become familiar with the room. This suggests that, in new situations, infants cope better when they come across new things gradually.

Helping children with separation anxiety

If your child is suffering from separation anxiety, there are lots of things you can do to help her.



Read about the [stepladder approach](#), a gentle behavioural technique used to help children who suffer from separation anxiety.

- Tell your child when you're leaving and when you'll be back. This is a helpful thing to do, even with babies. Some parents feel it will be easier to sneak out when their child is settled, but this can make things worse – your child might feel confused or upset when he realises you're not around, and might then be more difficult to settle the next time you leave him.
- Say goodbye to your child briefly – don't drag it out.
- Settle your child in an enjoyable activity before leaving.
- If you're leaving your child in a new setting (child care centre, preschool, friend's house, babysitter), spend time at the new place with your child before the separation occurs. She needs to know she's being left in a safe place with a person you can both trust, and she'll be less distressed if she's left in a familiar place with familiar people.
- To increase your child's feelings of safety, let him take something he loves from home, such as a teddy bear, pillow or blanket. These objects can be gradually phased out as he becomes more settled.
- Keep a relaxed and happy expression on your face when you're leaving your child. If you seem worried or sad, your child might think the place isn't safe and can get upset too.
- It can be useful to tell your child's child care centre, preschool or school about her anxiety, and let them know about anything you're doing to help your child. This way, other people in your child's environment can give her consistent support.
- Gently encourage your child to separate from you by giving him practice. It's important to give him positive experiences of separations and reunions. Avoiding separations from your child can make the problem worse.
- No matter how frustrated you feel, avoid criticising or being negative about your child's difficulty with separation. For example, avoid saying things like, 'She's such a mummy's girl' or 'Don't be such a baby'.
- Read books or make up stories with your child about separation fears. (For example, 'Once upon a time, there was a little bunny who didn't want to leave her mummy in the hutch. She was afraid of what she might find outside ...'.) This might help your child feel he's not alone in being afraid of separating from his parents.
- Make a conscious effort to foster your child's [self-esteem](#) by complimenting her and

giving her lots of [positive attention](#).

Professional help

You know your child best. If you're worried about his anxiety, consider seeking professional help. Here are some places to start:

- your child's school counsellor
- your child's GP or paediatrician
- local children's health or community health centre
- a specialist anxiety clinic (present in most states).



Visit [My Neighbourhood](#) to find professional services near you.



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Web links

- ▶ [WorryWiseKids.org](#) – Separation Anxiety Disorder

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