

Separation Anxiety in Young Children

What is Separation Anxiety?

Stress when separated from a parent is normal. Starting at about 8 months old, children often become anxious, clingy, and scared of unfamiliar people or objects. This phase is called separation or stranger anxiety. Separation anxiety is usually hardest between 10-18 months old. Separation anxiety can be more difficult for children who are experiencing other stresses in their lives, such as moving, new child care, a new baby, or problems between the parents.



Why Do Children Have Separation Anxiety?

The child is beginning to understand that each person is different. This means that your child is learning that there is only one of you. The child also starts to understand that when he cannot see you, you have gone somewhere else, and he wants you to stay close to him. Young children do not understand time and do not know when or if you will ever come back. It is important to keep your promise to return at a certain time (after nap or after snack time) so your child has a memory of your return.

How Can I Help My Child with Separation Anxiety?

- Your child will be more upset when tired, hungry, or sick. Try to make sure your child is fed and rested when you leave.
- Prepare your child by telling him that you will return and let him know when you will be back. Because your child cannot understand time, use events that he can understand, such as, "After nap, you have snack, then you play, then Mommy will pick you up."
- Respect your child's feelings. Say something like, "I know you don't want me to leave, but I will be back after lunch." Do not tease or get angry.

- Stay calm, matter-of-fact and sympathetic. "I know you are upset that I have to leave, but I have to go to school (or work or wherever)." If necessary, hand your child to the caregiver, wave good-bye and leave.
- Make your child feel secure by giving lots of love and attention when you are together.
- "Practice" short-term separations by playing peek-a-boo or hide and seek. As you go into the next room out of sight, talk to your baby: "Where did Mommy go?" When you return, let her know: "Here I am!" These repeated separations can help your child learn that your disappearance is only temporary.
- Don't sneak away from your child. This will only cause the child to be more scared the next time you leave.
- Try to keep your own anxieties under control. If your child senses your distress at leaving, that tells him that there must be something wrong.
- If your child goes to child care, it is a good idea to have objects in that setting that are comforting to them. Some favorites are family pictures, a special toy or stuffed animal, or a special blanket for naptime.

