

## Separation Anxiety

It's natural for your young child to feel anxious when you say goodbye. Although it can be difficult, separation anxiety is a normal stage of development. With understanding, patience, and coping strategies, it can be relieved—and should fade as your child gets older. In some children, however, fears about separation seem to only intensify as time passes, or to resurface out of the blue. If anxieties are persistent and excessive enough to get in the way of school or other activities, it is possible that your child has separation anxiety disorder. Unlike normal separation anxiety, this condition may require the support of a professional—but there is also a lot that you as a parent can do to help.



In early childhood, crying, tantrums, or clinginess are healthy reactions to separation. Separation anxiety can begin before a child's first birthday, and may pop up again or last until a child is four years old and sometimes older, but both the intensity level and timing of separation anxiety vary tremendously from child to child. A little worry over leaving mom or dad is normal, even when your child is older. You can ease your child's separation anxiety by staying patient and consistent, and by gently but firmly setting limits.

Some kids, however, experience separation anxiety that doesn't go away, even with a parent's best efforts. These children experience a continuation or reoccurrence of intense separation anxiety during their elementary school years or beyond. If separation anxiety is excessive enough to interfere with normal activities like school and friendships, and lasts for months rather than days, it may be a sign of a larger problem: separation anxiety disorder, if none of the steps below work and the behavior carries on for an extended period of time please seek the help of a Psychologist or Play Therapist.



## Easing normal separation anxiety in children

For children with *normal* separation anxiety, there are steps you can take to make the process of separation anxiety easier.

- **Practice separation.** Leave your child with a caregiver for brief periods and short distances at first.
- **Schedule separations after naps or feedings.** Babies are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they're tired or hungry.
- **Develop a "goodbye" ritual.** Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss.
- **Keep familiar surroundings when possible and make new surroundings familiar.** Have the sitter come to your house. When your child is away from home, let him or her bring a familiar object.
- **Have a consistent primary caregiver.** If you hire a caregiver, try to keep him or her on the job.
- **Leave without fanfare.** Tell your child you are leaving and that you will return, then *go*—don't stall.
- **Minimize scary television.** Your child is less likely to be fearful if the shows you watch are not frightening.
- **Try not to give in.** Reassure your child that he or she will be just fine—setting limits will help the adjustment to separation.
- **Start small.** Get him used to the idea of you leaving by disappearing behind a door for a moment ("I'm back!"), then into another room for a couple of minutes ("Here I am!"), and finally leaving the house for (gradually) longer periods of time.
- **Watch your body language.** That smart little creature can detect anxiety or ambivalence through your facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. (So no furrowed brows or nervous toe-tapping, please.)
- **Exude the three c's:** calm, confidence, and caring. If junior cries, don't scold, tease, and get annoyed. (Imagining yourself in his tiny shoes may help you keep your cool.) Tell him you understand how he feels. ("I know you want me to stay, but I'll be back soon. I love you.") Then make a quick exit.
- **Never sneak out.** It'll only make your child feel more anxious the next time you need to separate. Instead, create a "leaving ritual" (e.g., a parting phrase like "See you later, alligator," five kisses on each cheek, or an exchange of wacky waves from the window).
- **Provide a mommy-reminder.** Some kids like having a photo or a hand-drawn picture of your smiling face, or some other personal memento (like your glove or sock).
- **Get your child and babysitter engaged** in an activity before you go (like doing a puzzle or building with blocks). He may still cry when you leave, but it'll give your sitter something to work with once you're gone.
- **Put on a happy face.** If you're dropping your child off at day care, stay upbeat. Talk to him about what he'll be doing with the other kids ("Hey, today is dress-up day!").



- **Let him know when you'll return** in terms he understands (like after nap time or story hour). And be on time for pick-ups. (Five minutes of waiting feels like forever to a toddler.) Plus if he feels insecure about when and if you'll return, he'll continue having a tough time letting you go in the mornings.

### Easing separation anxiety in children: Tips for school

- Address the cause for avoidance of school.** Initiate a plan for your child to return to school immediately. This may include gradual reintroduction with partial days at first.
- Accommodate late arrival.** If the school can be lenient about late arrival at first, it can give you and your child a little wiggle room to talk and separate at your child's slower pace.
- Identify a safe place.** Find a place at school where your child can go to reduce anxiety during stressful periods. Develop guidelines for appropriate use of the safe place.
- Send notes for your child to read.** You can place a note for your child in his or her lunch box or locker. A quick "I love you!" on a napkin can reassure a child.
- Provide assistance to the child during interactions with peers.** An adult's help, whether it is from a teacher or counselor, may be beneficial for both the child and his or her peers.
- Reward a child's efforts.** Just like at home, every good effort—or small step in the right direction—deserves to be praised.

### Separation Anxiety at different ages

#### The first strike: babyhood

Though the timing can vary from child to child, separation anxiety typically first hits around 8 months, when babies suddenly grasp that their parents exist apart from them. By 6 months, introduce your baby to other regular caregivers, such as relatives or a babysitter. "Your child needs practice being away from you". Keep your goodbye short, prolonging the departure gives your child the idea that there's something to be afraid of. Avoid sneaking off, tricking your child can break your child's trust in you.

#### The peak: toddlerhood

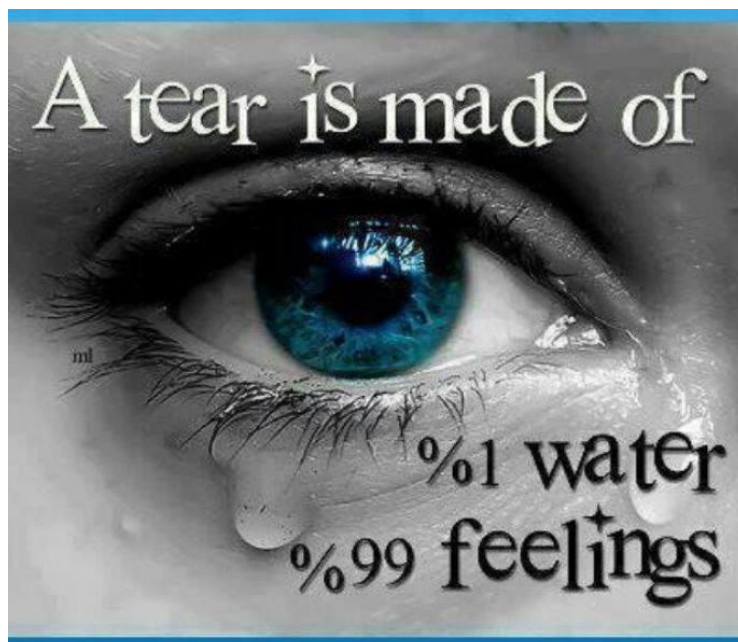
For some kids, separation anxiety vanishes before toddlerhood; for others, that's when it starts, peaking sometime between 12 and 24 months and bringing a more potent dose of distress, this is when children develop a strong sense of attachment to the parent. Develop a goodbye ritual. Give your child a small job,



like when you leave for work..."shut the door for Mommy", a little responsibility makes the transition a lot easier. Provide an ETA, "A child this age doesn't understand 'three hours,' but you can say, 'I'll be back after snack time.'"

### **The relapse: preschool age**

For parents, this may be the most exhausting form of separation anxiety. Just when you think your child's developed a little independence, the tantrums and tears come roaring back, usually thanks to a new stress such as a new sibling, going to school, an illness in the family, or moving to a different house. Let your child know it's okay to feel nervous, say something like "I know that you're nervous. Let's think of another time you were scared but it was okay. Remember the first time in the pool?" You'll help show him that his feelings are normal—and that he'll be able to handle them. Plan some extra one-on-one time, develop a predictable bedtime routine, do your best not to cave in, a preschooler who is experiencing separation anxiety may also regress in other ways, such as asking for her pacifier back or insisting on sleeping with you. When you're exhausted or fed up, it's only natural to take the path of least resistance and ease up on the rules you've established. Instead of altering the routine, give your child extra hugs and kisses. Plus, by maintaining the sameness, you're sending the message that there's nothing wrong." Of course, we all give in sometimes. So if you find yourself being more flexible than you planned, cut yourself slack and try again.



**This newsletter has been issued by:**

**TraumaCare, Box 1807, Magaliesview, Gauteng, 2067**

**[www.traumacare.co.za](http://www.traumacare.co.za) \* [mail@traumacare.co.za](mailto:mail@traumacare.co.za) \* Tel: 071 592 9690**

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