



Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety something a lot of children experience. In this article, we're going to have a look at what it is, and what you can do about it.

What is it?

Separation anxiety is simply the term we use to describe when a baby, toddler, child or teenager experiences anxiety when they're separated from their parent or caregiver. Between 8 -9 and 16-18 months old, most babies experience anxiety when they're separated from their attachment person. This is very normal. As the child gets older, separation anxiety usually decreases. It might flare up if your child is feeling stressed, sick, or sad – times when they need extra emotional support. But it should settle down once the stressor is dealt with, the illness passes, or your child cheers up. For some kids, it doesn't decrease or settle down. In fact, it might even get worse. In this case, your child might be experiencing separation anxiety disorder, and it might be helpful to see a professional, such as a Play Therapist.

How do I know if my child is experiencing Separation Anxiety Disorder?

For a professional to diagnose Separation Anxiety Disorder, your child would need to experience "excessive" distress around being away from home or you, and "excessive" worry about you dying or getting hurt, or them being separated from you (e.g. getting kidnapped, getting hospitalised), even though these things are unlikely to happen. This manifests as refusals to leave you, nightmares and physical symptoms like headaches and stomach-aches. This experience of worries and avoidance has to have lasted 4 weeks or more, and cause significant distress. Your child might be very clingy, not want to be alone (even if you're only in the next room over), and experience worried thoughts that they can't get out of their heads, even if they try. Many children with Separation Anxiety Disorder especially struggle at bedtime. They are afraid to sleep by themselves, and may want someone to stay with them until they go to sleep, or to sleep in your bed.

Some of these symptoms can overlap with other anxiety disorders, but if your child's worries are predominantly focused around a fear of separation from you, it's likely they're experiencing Separation Anxiety Disorder. If your child is experiencing some of these things, or these symptoms but to a more manageable degree, they may still be experiencing separation anxiety, just not to the levels of the disorder. But they will probably need some extra support too.

So that's separation anxiety. What can you do to help your child overcome it? Firstly, your child may benefit from having some sessions with a professional, such as a Play Therapist. Secondly, there are a number of strategies you can use. Let's have a look.

What can a Play Therapist do?

A Play Therapist will provide your child with a safe, supportive environment to express and process their worries through play, using carefully chosen toys and art materials. They can also provide you with emotional support and practical strategies as you support your child.

What can you do?

There are also lots of things you can do to help. Here are some suggestions.

- **Practice!** Although avoiding tricky separations is easier in the short term, in the long-term, it makes the problem worse because your child never learns they can do it. **Break down big challenges into a sequence of small steps**, and gradually work your way through them. Only move on to the next step once your child has mastered the current step. Make each step challenging, but achievable, and build upon previous successes.

For example, a family building towards the goal “Go to Kindy” might start with the step: “Visit Kindy with Mum.” Then “*Stay at Kindy for one hour with Mum, then go home.*” Then this time can be increased, step by step, until the child can make it through a whole day.

- Don't kiss-and-run when dropping off your child, especially if it's a new or unfamiliar place. It's important to give your child time to **adjust, orientate, and familiarise themselves with the new place**. This helps them to feel safe. Set them up with an activity they'll enjoy, so that they have something to think about and focus on.
- **Transitional objects**, like a soft toy, scarf, or something of yours, can be hugely important in helping a young child calm themselves when they start to feel upset. Many children get a sense of reassurance when you will *definitely* come back if you've “loaned” them something like a bracelet. Even an older child can feel comforted by squeezing a small, pocket-sized special thing, like a crystal or mini-toy.
- **Tell your child when you leave, and when you'll be back**. This allows your child to say “a proper goodbye”, and if they're old enough to read clocks, they can check for themselves how long before you return.
- **Gently remind your child you'll be OK**. Lots of children worry more about how you'll cope without them than about how they'll cope without you. They need to be reminded that as much as you love their caring heart, it's the parent's job to take care of their children, not the other way round.
- **Normalise it**. Read or make up stories about separation anxiety (if your child is seeing a therapist, they may be able to help you with this). This helps your child to know that they're not the only one who feels like this, and provides them with words for, and ways of talking about, their own feelings and experiences

Take Home Points:

Separation anxiety is not something to get anxious about. It's a normal part of child development, and there are lots of strategies that you can use to help your child through it. There will be successes, there will be set-backs, but you and your child will get there.